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Reframing the Subject: Abjection in Twentieth-Century American Literature

Amy Leigh White
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Amy Leigh White entitled "Reframing the Subject: Abjection in Twentieth-Century American Literature." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Mary E. Papke, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Allen Dunn, Amy Elias, Stephen Blackwell

Accepted for the Council:
Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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REFRAMING THE SUBJECT: ABJECTION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Amy Leigh White

May 2004

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"Not that we are competent to claim anything for ourselves,

but our competence comes from God." (II Cor. 3:5)

ABSTRACT

In response to major societal change in the early years of the twentieth century, modern psychology suggested new ways of thinking about selfhood. One's relationship with oneself, one's subjectivity, came to be viewed as being processed through a matrix of factors that the self is *subject* to. The notion of the Cartesian "self" was thus seriously questioned. Is there an essential self? To what extent is self conditioned by environment? Can we know ourselves? If not, is the self worth talking about? Making these social, psychological, and philosophical challenges to the subject visible, abjection in twentieth-century literature shows authors examining these questions in their treatment of literary *subject*s.

According to Freud, the basis of selfhood is an identification of the self in the eyes of an *Other*. Identity is thus established through relationship. The prerequisite to relationship, however, is the self's process of mapping its own psychological boundaries. While this individuation, parallel to Jacques Lacan's mirror phase, occurs in infancy, the self must also guard against later challenges to unity. Any encounter that tests the boundary of selfhood challenges the self to engage in *abjection*, or the separation from what it is not. In Julia Kristeva's theory of subjectivity, the *abject* represents what is cast aside as neither subject nor object. The psychological state of abjection, then, may be produced when one experiences a lack of recognition or misrecognition from an Other that leaves one's self feeling cast out, cast down, or cast aside--in effect, beside one's *self*.

In this project I examine portrayals of the *abject* in novels written by authors in different decades of the twentieth century: James, Olsen, Nabokov, DeLillo, and Morrison. Related to parenting, children, love, death, madness, and criminality, abjection is necessarily involved in literature's primary themes. The theory of abjection also provides a method for analyzing variables that affect a person's ongoing experience of being a human *subject*: gender, economic status, social class, race, and the corporeality of the body. These categories are linked, in a theory of the abject, by the core psychological factor of an unsettled subject. In highlighting the distinction between thinking and being, between self-consciousness and identification from and with others, the *abject* helps to draw important fault lines on the map of the self.

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"As sites of existence, we have been entrusted with and sentenced to ecstatical temporality." Anton Corey

INTRODUCTION

According to Freud, the basis of selfhood is an identification of the self in the eyes of an *other*. One knows that one *is* according to the sight of whom one is not. Identity is thus established through relationship. The prerequisite to relationship, however, is the self's process of mapping its own psychological boundaries. While this individuation occurs in infancy, roughly parallel to Jacques Lacan's mirror phase, the self must also guard against later challenges to unity. A child's own family may make his or her experience of subjectivity a frustrated or even aborted process; relationships may contain the threat of merger between individuals; society may discourage the independent subjectivity of its citizens. Any encounter that tests the boundary of selfhood challenges the self to engage in *abjection*, or the separation from what it is not.

In terms of psychoanalytic theory, the *abject* represents what is cast aside as neither subject nor object. Growing out of the work of Jacques Lacan and developed further by Julia Kristeva, the idea of abjection involves humans' simultaneous fascination with and repulsion from the in-between space that is neither subject nor object. In current theory and art, abjection represents the human reaction towards what has been labeled impure, filthy, or transgressive. From examples of garbage, human excrement, or the ultimate "throw-away" of the human corpse, representations of abjectness all share the disconcerting liminality that is neither subject nor object but hovers in the space between

them. Psychologically, the abject is understood as a stage filling the gap prior to the existence of subject/object relations within a child's consciousness. Culturally, the abject becomes manifest in all that societal, sexual, or religious customs label as taboo. As Martin Jay explains, the abject "has both biological and cultural dimensions. It encompasses all of those bodily wastes . . . that anticipate the culminating moment when the total body becomes waste through its transformation into a corpse." It is witnessed culturally, in turn, "in anything in fact that threatens rigid boundaries and evokes powerful fears of filth, pollution, contamination and defilement" (237-38).

While abjection has been most fully explicated in Kristeva's book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, the notion is rooted in Lacan's theories of how a person experiences differentiation in order to become a speaking Subject within the Symbolic. To understand abjection fully, then, it is necessary to consider Lacan's major points regarding subjectivity.

In his book *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen explains Lacan's theories of selfhood and language. Just as Freud believes the ego "is formed through successive identifications," for Lacan, as Borch-Jacobsen writes, "the ego forms through identification, by *conforming* to the image in which it sees *itself*' (64). Lacan postulates, however, that from the ego's beginning the self has an ambiguous relationship with this mirroring other: "the other-me is never anything but a rival, all the more detested for being admired, all the more violently negated for being amorously incorporated" (Borch-Jacobsen 32). The self both loves and resents this separate, opposing self that it needs in order to attain self-consciousness.

Another vital part of Lacan's theory of subjectivity is the self's immersion in

language. In becoming a *self*, the human infant is acceding to the Symbolic, the world of language wherein its identity lies in an already constructed space. As Borch-Jacobsen puts it, "the Lacanian subject is the subject subjected to the signifier, the subject dispossessed of any meaning . . . or mastery of language, which speaks him more than he speaks it" (186). One way of elucidating this view is to consider the *self* analogous to the *sign* of Saussurian linguistics or Derridean deconstruction. Just as the connection between signified and signifier cannot be solidly linked in a one-to-one correspondence, so the relationship between self-consciousness and the existing self is similarly fluid. Just as phonemes are significant according to their difference from similar sound/word constructions, so are selves constituted only in opposition to others with whom they are in relationship.

To extend this parallel further, the diachronic nature of signs can also be seen as a metaphoric representation of the self's evolution through time. Explaining the importance of sign theory in Lacan's thinking, Borch-Jacobsen defines the sign's arbitrariness, saying "The signifier is truly senseless . . . and, just like a character on a typewriter keyboard, it makes sense only by effacing another signifier, taking its *place* on the written page, *next to* other signifiers" (177). He then moves to the syntactic dimension, explaining the importance of context in establishing the meaning of a word: "According to Lacan, no signifier will have any definite signified *before* being combined with other signifiers, until the point where a period retroactively and provisionally seals the meaning of the sentence. . . . The meaning of a signifier is always yet *to come* in another punctuating signifier" (181). As Lacan himself puts it, "The signifier, by its very nature, always *anticipates* meaning by unfolding its dimension *before* it" (Borch-

Jacobsen 181). Thus a sign points to meaning that is elucidated as it extends forward in time, just as the phenomenological self is ever-becoming itself into the future.

The importance of this for Lacan is that the self's flexibility makes psychoanalysis potentially successful. Since Lacan's "subject is always already symbolized and is therefore equally well irrealized, denatured, and fictionalized," then "*for Lacan, the subject is always a myth*" (Borch-Jacobsen 154, italics in original). Lacan thus reaches a paradoxical understanding of subjectivity. The subject can be conceived both as an acting center of consciousness as well as a changing being that is far removed from the stable Cartesian ego. In other words, the self is viewed simultaneously as both a defined and an unbounded entity.

The physical dimension of Lacan's theory is easily identifiable. Humans both are and are not identical to their corporeal selves. From the time people are born, the cells of their body are living and dying; hair and teeth are lost and regrown; bones and muscle grow in size and strength for many years, then begin to decline if not properly nourished and exercised. The experience of the human body is a constant process of change in living matter until we no longer refer to it as a body but as a corpse. Borch-Jacobsen explains the importance of this concept to Lacan: "The living being, as Lacan recalls, never stops separating himself from 'parts' of himself (placenta, feces, urine, sperm, and so on)" (231). Lacan believes that humans also experience separations wherein the physical parting is complemented by an even more important psychological one, from the breast, the eye, the voice, or the sexual organ. These separations "have in common that they are separations from oneself, 'internal' separations. In them, the body sacrifices parts of itself, so to speak, by 'cutting' itself along 'a margin or border.'. . . Hence the

ambiguity of the 'parts' thus separated from the body, since in relation to it they are both the same and other, both similar and dissimilar" (231). Borch-Jacobsen argues that it is "this ambiguity, this drifting between imaginary continuity and real separation, that primarily interests Lacan" (231). This ambiguity in the division of bodily self and not-self is thus analogous, I would argue, to the psychological experience of abjection.

The psychoanalytic flexibility of the term "abject" comes from the word's ability to function as three different parts of speech. The lexical root is the Latin ***abjicere***, meaning "to cast off, throw away." The noun ***abjection***, first recorded in 1410, has a four-part definition in the *OED*: "1. The action of casting down; abasement, humiliation, degradation. 2. The condition or estate of one cast down; abasement, humiliation, degradation; downcastness, abjectness, low estate. 3. The action of casting off or away; rejection. 4. That which is cast off or away; refuse, scum, dregs." Its adjectival and participle form, ***abject***, dates from 1430 and is defined similarly: "1. Cast off, cast out, rejected. 2. Cast down, downcast, brought low in position, condition or estate, low-lying. 3. Down in spirit or hope; low in regard or estimation, degraded, mean-spirited, despicable." *Abject* also appeared as a verb: "1. To cast off, throw off or away, cast out, exclude, reject . . . generally, though not always, as inferior, unworthy, or vile, and hence passing into the idea of casting down, degrading. 2. To cast or throw down . . . [,] to lower, degrade, abase, debase." The word thus has a history of negative connotations that bear the sense of separatedness, lowliness, or impoverishment of some sort.

In her discussion of abjection in *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva explains the concept in its most stark, theoretical terms: "The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. . . . What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone

or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object--that of being opposed to *I*" (1). In other words, the abject is what the consciousness sets aside as both not-me and not-Other. The abject is therefore elusive, non-specific, and defined according to its function and position in relation to the subject.

Metaphor can be helpful in discussing this abstract idea. If the self is a circle, then the abject can be imagined as what hovers outside the boundary lines and tests the porousness of that boundary, or as a scribbling outside those lines which threatens to confuse the distinguishing border of a unified subject. In "Psychoanalysis and Its Abject: What Lurks Behind the Fear of the 'Mother,'" Marie-Florine Bruneau defines the abject as "that which menaces the integrity of the ego or of the group" (25). Since "the abject" in psychoanalytic theory is a stage the infant must pass through in order to accede to its role as subject, what is "abject" in nature may be anything which remains a threat to the integrity of the subject in adulthood: "The abject is a defilement which frightens, because if it invades the subject, the latter fears she\he might disappear. . . . Abjection has to do with the necessity to demarcate the limits to the needs of the elaboration of identity in the face of a fear of indifferentiation" (Bruneau 25, 32). Enactments of abjection or those things which society has labeled as abject refer back, then, both to the solipsism of pre-language infancy as well as to the pain of separation from the mother. As Jay explains, "The abject recalls a primal fusion, or at least a confusion of boundaries, which undercuts the self-sufficiency of the subject" (238). Thus the state of abjection may be precipitated by reminders of pre-subjectivity: the comfort of original maternal union, for example, or the infant's perceived threat of disappearing apart from a mirroring gaze of love.

Helga Geyer-Ryan also defines abjection in terms of the infant's initial individuation from the mother. She explains "[t]he emptiness" of abjection as "the fundamental deficiency in the first separation. It is the existential void, and all definitions of later subjectivity must ultimately help to conceal it" (501). Yet abjection, as a boundary-drawing process, both keeps something out and holds something in: "The emptiness is the zero point of subject and object, the very end of all regression, but also the starting point of differentiation" (501). Subjects are able to become defined entities precisely because the abject is pushed outside their borders. However, the possibility of disintegrating into and re-meshing with the abject remains a fantasy and a fear in the corner of consciousness.

The complex relationship between subject and abject is further elaborated in Elizabeth Gross' "The Body of Signification." Gross defines abjection as "the unspoken of a stable speaking position, an abyss at the very borders of the subject's identity, a hole into which the subject may fall" (87). She points out that "the subject must have a certain, if incomplete, mastery of the abject; it must keep it in check and at a distance in order to define itself as a subject" (87). Distanced and forbidden, the abject becomes a source of temptation, beckoning the subject to remember and re-visit the miasma of pre-subjectivity. The abject never goes away; it is simply not looked at or repressed, even as it continues to call to the self. And thus constitutes its danger, as Gross explains:

> Abjection is the underside of the symbolic. It is what the symbolic must reject, cover over and contain. The symbolic requires that a border separate or protect the subject from this abyss which beckons and haunts it: the abject entices and attracts the subject ever closer to its edge. It is an

> insistence on the subject's necessary relation to death, to animality, and to materiality, being the subject's recognition and refusal of its corporeality. The abject demonstrates the impossibility of clear-cut borders, lines of demarcation, divisions between the clean and the unclean, the proper and the improper, order and disorder. (89)

This "undersided" nature of abjection is what invests it with the power both to compel and fascinate yet also to repulse and sicken. As Geyer-Ryan puts it, the "revulsion" produced by abjection "is a mixture of fear of losing one's identity, and a fascination with this loss, where the pleasure of fusion, the pleasure derived from the abandonment of identity in the undifferentiated, becomes discoverable" (502). What is abject is thus paradoxical; it is both highly attractive and profoundly disgusting.

Kristeva similarly emphasizes how abjection always hovers along the edges of desire and always colors the object of desire with the fascination produced by its own repression:

> If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very ***being***, that it *is* none other than abject. The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of

> the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded. (*Powers* 5)

Gross also explains the phenomenon as follows: "If the object is an externalized correlate of the subject, then the abject is with the fading, emersion, or disappearance of the subject and its imaginary hold over the object. The abject is that part of the subject . . . which it attempts to expel. The abject is the symptom of the object's failure to fill the subject or to define and anchor the subject" (87). The dynamics of this attempted correlation between subject and object are rooted in the phenomenological being of a subject who is always approaching but never identical to its ideal self of self-consciousness.

The object-relations school of psychoanalysis, based in the work of Melanie Klein and D.W. Winnicott, provides another important background for understanding abjection. "Object-relations theorists," explains Nancy Chodorow, "image [sic] a course of transactions between self and other(s) that help form our first subjectivity and sense of self, and that throughout life are renegotiated to recreate the sense of self and other in terms of connection, separation, and in between" (10). Positing the roots of selfhood even before Lacan's mirror phase, Klein describes an infant's attempt to link its deepest love and deepest frustration in the body of the mother. These contradictory impulses are experienced, furthermore, when a baby still feels its body virtually as one with the mother, and thus good and bad feelings toward mother amount to good and bad impulses towards self. Chodorow further writes:

> Along with the earliest development of its sense of separateness, the infant constructs an internal set of unconscious, affectively loaded representations of others in relation to its self, and an internal sense of self

> in relationship emerges. Images of felt good and bad aspects of the mother . . . become part of the self, of a relational ego structure, through unconscious mental processes that appropriate and incorporate these images. With maturation, these early images and fragments of perceived experience become put together into a self. As externality and internality are established, therefore, what comes to be internal includes what originally were aspects of the other and the relation to the other. (105)

The infant thus begins a relationship with *itself* that is modeled according to its first foundational relationship with a caregiver.

One's relationship to one's self also becomes attached to a narrative of the ideal self which accepts and rejects what it will and will not incorporate. Winnicott observes this in his studies of children who act out their selves during play; his work makes visible "the transitional space between mother and infant that is neither me nor not-me and that becomes the creative arena of play and culture" (Chodorow 10). Elizabeth Wright also discusses Winnicott, saying, "the child will in fantasy invest a part of something with the characteristics of a person, the result being that it will waver between love and hate towards this 'part-object'" (80). Children's ability to express ambivalent and even contradictory feelings towards others in play is an outward representation of the internal structure of the self in object-relations psychology.

The process of sorting through what the self will and will not incorporate maps readily onto Kristeva's process of abjection. The self's drawing of boundary lines, holding in and expelling in the same movement, as it is described by Kristeva, is precisely the psychological maneuver explained by object-relations psychology. In the

formation of an ideal self, Wright explains:

> Projection is a process whereby states of feeling and unconscious wishes are expelled from the self and attributed to another person or thing. Introjection is a process whereby qualities that belong to an external object are absorbed and unconsciously regarded as belonging to the self. The infant thus creates an ideal object for itself by getting rid of all bad impulses from itself and taking in all it perceives as good from the object. (80)

Even when this process is successful in producing an integrated, coherent self (which it often is not), there remains the felt distance between the self as *is* and the self as it believes it ought to be perceived--between the real and the ideal self.

This tension in selfhood is also a foundational concept for Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*. Heidegger believes strongly in the identity of the self. For him, "the who" of being is the "self" which is the same:

> As something self-same in manifold otherness, this subject has the character of the *self*. Even if one rejects a substantial soul, the thingliness of consciousness and the objectivity of the person, ontologically one still posits something whose being retains the meaning of objective presence, whether explicitly or not. Substantiality is the ontological clue for the determination of beings in terms of whom the question of the who is answered. (108)

This unity of self, however, still experiences a split between its internal felt sense of itself and its being for others in the world. In Heidegger's words, "The self of everyday

Da-sein is the *they-self* which we distinguish from the *authentic self*, the self which has explicitly grasped itself. As the they-self, Da-sein is *dispersed* in the they and must first find itself. This dispersion characterizes the 'subject' of the kind of being which we know as heedful absorption in the world nearest encountered" (121). The self is so thoroughly constituted and manifest with others and in the world for Heidegger that this "they" is one's primary way of being in the world. *Mitda-sein*, co-existence, means *being* is being with others.

Building on the phenomenology of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty constitutes the self as fundamentally *situated* in the body, with others, in the world, and in time. "Self-consciousness" becomes nearly an oxymoron, since to be conscious means to be conscious *of something* which is precisely not one's self. Therefore phenomenology argues that the self is in fact distinguished by the motion of the ongoing dialectical play between a self's changing environment and the subjective experiencing of that environment. Any apprehension of self is always belated and of the self as-it-was, not as-it-is.

For Merleau-Ponty, then, we are never identical to ourselves. Our self-conception at any given moment is the sum of all of our previous remembered moments, contingent upon our continuance in the next moment, and full of all the possibilities of our future moments. Both *retention* and *protention*, past and future, are experienced subjectively in the present. The self thus becomes the empty space, the differential between lived experience and future potential. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes:

> My hold on the past and the future is precarious, and my possession of my own time is always postponed until a stage when I may fully understand it,

> yet this stage can never be reached. . . . I shall never manage to seize the present through which I live with apodeictic certainty, and since the lived is thus never entirely comprehensible, what I understand never quite tallies with my living experience, in short, I am never quite at one with myself. (346-47)

That is, I am always *about to be* and my awareness remains only of what I was. Thinking is always a half-step behind experience, and self-consciousness is necessarily figured in the past tense. In phenomenology, selfhood itself becomes a shifting, amorphous space and the self an animal swimming through time, continually shedding its skin.

Published only a few years prior to Merleau-Ponty's treatise on phenomenology, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* lays out the existential foundations of abjection. Sharing the object-relations view in which self and other are interdependent, for Sartre, the self is dependent on time to give it definition and meaning: "I exist first as a lack to myself, and the intermediary positions which I adopt are only ways of uniting myself with that future state so as to merge with it; each position has meaning only through that future state" (101). Equally, the self is dependent on others for recognition: "The Other is the ex-centric limit which contributes to the constitution of my being. He is the test of my being inasmuch as he throws me outside of myself toward structures which at once both escape me and define me; it is this test which originally reveals the Other to me" (221). This throwing outside of self towards what both "escape[s] me and define[s] me" is strikingly akin to Kristeva's description of abjection.

For Sartre and existential phenomenology, however, this experiencing of the self as abject is a common and necessary occurrence that is not based in the subconscious:

"No external nothingness in-itself separates my consciousness from the Other's consciousness; it is by the very fact of being me that I exclude the Other. The Other is the one who excludes me by being himself, the one whom I exclude by being myself" (212). This awareness of the necessary chasm between self and other is complicated by the self's awareness of its dependence on that separate, uncontrollable other for the recognition that is vital to the self's existence. This human dependence on and desire for what remains ungraspable is something Sartre describes in terms of abjection:

> Thus myself-as-object is neither knowledge nor a unity of knowledge but an uneasiness, a lived wrenching away from the ekstatic [sic] unity of the for-itself, a limit which I can not reach and which yet I am. The Other through whom this Me *comes to me* is neither knowledge nor category but the fact of the presence of a strange freedom. In fact my wrenching away from myself and the upsurge of the Other's freedom are one; I can feel them and live them only as an ensemble. (251)

Selfhood is thus tenuous, projected, and lived in the space between being's *now* and perception's delay across time.

Distanced from its self-consciousness of itself, the ego therefore depends upon recognition from an Other. In *The Bonds of Love*, Jessica Benjamin discusses the importance of healthy mutual recognition in forming relationships not based on a dynamics of domination. She explains, "Recognition is that response from the other which makes meaningful the feelings, intentions, and actions of the self. It allows the self to realize its agency and authorship in a tangible way. But such recognition can only come from an other whom we, in turn, recognize as a person in his or her own right"

(12). Only another subject has power to bestow genuine recognition. Only when two subjects are able to do this simultaneously, however, can a real bond of love form. As Benjamin writes, "domination and submission result from a breakdown of the necessary tension between self-assertion and mutual recognition that allows self and other to meet as sovereign equals" (12). Two selves-in-process must observe and acknowledge each other, each in a way that resonates with the other's own ideal of self. The danger, of course, is that the transfer will not be mutual. As Kristeva explains, this dynamic can go wrong: "identification reveals how the subject that ventures there can finally find himself a hypnotized slave of his master; how he can turn out to be a nonsubject, the shadow of a nonobject" (*Tales* 37). When either misrecognized or not recognized at all by another with whom a self seeks to identify, that self is relegated to the state of abjection.

This risk, however, is one the subject has no choice but to take since it is both dependent on an Other to come into being and to be loved. Heidegger's point that others are not an afterthought or an option for the self is relevant here: "The others are not encountered by grasping and previously discriminating one's own subject, initially objectively present, from other subjects also present. They are not encountered by first looking at oneself and then ascertaining the opposite pole of a distinction" (112). Similarly, Kristeva argues for the primacy of identification in self-formation:

> I am suggesting that we think of identification as the movement that causes the advent of the subject, insofar as he unites himself with the other and makes himself identical to the other. I am not saying that subjects model themselves *after* the other, for this sort of imitation would point to the realm of the plastic incertitude of comparison. On the contrary, the "I"

> transferred to the Other becomes One with the Other through the entire range of the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real. (*Maladies* 178)

Since the self aligns itself with the Other in this identification through the very action of abjection--repressing the abject--abjection is always related to the founding moments and most vital existence of a self's being.

All of this presupposes the existence of the *self*, however, and the concepts of *selfhood* and the *subject* have been complex and often contested during the twentieth century. The self in modernist philosophy already begins to be called into question. Often portrayed as displaced and alienated, the unity of the modern self is challenged by systems of forces threatening to disperse it into a scattered collection of selves. Postmodernist philosophy carries this dispersal further, even to the point of the self's obliteration in poststructuralism. As Robert Dunn explains, "The alleged epistemological crime of imposing a unified subjectivity on a chaotic and alienated existence was committed, according to postmodernists, to conceal an inherently multiplicitous and opaque subject, dispersed in the social and discursive contingencies of its particular, varying, and historically conditioned circumstances" (176). While postmodernists make a vital move in demonstrating the multifaceted ways that people are *subject to* discourses that construct and limit them, the other sense of the word *subject*--a center of consciousness and agency--must be retained. As Catherine Belsey points out, "The transcendental subject, outside and above the objects of its knowledge, is also the most deeply subjected being, at the mercy of the system of signified truth of which it is an effect. Conversely, the subjectivity which is imbricated in the knowledges it participates in and helps to produce has more options at its disposal" (562). The very projects of

postmodernism, often directed at social change, are dependent on the subject's retaining the ability to function as an empowered center of reflection and potential action.

One example of this poststructuralist dilemma is Gilles Deleuze's declaration of the self's demise in *Empiricism and Subjectivity*. His obituary notice is followed, importantly, by the idea of a new form of constructed selfhood:

> It will be foolish, of course, to deny that the death of a certain subject has really been wished for, and that it has, perhaps, really happened. Rumor has it that the death has been wished for in the wake of a certain deadly violence perpetrated against the Other. In this case, the resurrection of another Self and of an (otherwise) Other had understandably to wait for the completion of the critique of the Cartesian, Kantian, and Husserlian subject, and for the unmasking of the fraudulent accreditation that this subject had received in classical and modern texts. (10-11)

The result of this reconstruction project, however, is far different from the essential self traditionally understood in philosophy. Deleuze himself admits this: "The mind is not subject. It is subjected. When the subject is constituted in the mind under the effect of principles, the mind apprehends itself as a self, for it has been qualified. But the problem is this: if the subject is constituted only inside the collection of ideas, how can the collection of ideas be apprehended as a self, how can I say 'I,' under the influence of those same principles?" (31). Using language and saying "I" as he writes, Deleuze's philosophical dead-end is manifest. As Heidegger asks, "[W]hat is less dubious than the givenness of the I?" (109).

The century also saw a more dynamic model of the self emerge in the developing

field of social psychology and the work of sociologists such as George Herbert Mead. Positing an ongoing series of self-other adjustments between individuals in the social world analogous to Darwinian evolution in the natural world, "[f]or Mead, the consequence of sociality is that subjects are constituted *interactively* in a shared and mutually responsive process of adaptation" (Dunn 206). Although Mead's formulation is a pragmatist one that does not account for an innate or transcendent self, his work offers an important solution to the poststructuralists' failure to retain any agency, ultimately, for the subject. As Dunn explains, Mead's theories "bear an intriguing resemblance to aspects of poststructuralism but redress the limitations of this approach by focusing on the social production and functions of language while insisting on the centrality of the social self in the interpretive production of meaning" (15). Like object-relations psychology, then, Mead's views recognize the importance of ongoing negotiations between a self and others and thus lend themselves as well to a discussion of abjection.

Abjection thus overlaps the fields of philosophy, psychology, and sociology. In looking chronologically at selected texts from the twentieth century, I hope to see how changes in these fields are reflected in literature as well as to understand how changing approaches to the novel coincide with changing conceptions of selfhood. Examining instances of abjection in literature reveals ways that authors themselves have grappled with questions of self and subjectivity.

Throughout my discussion I will be using the terms *self* and *subjectivity* interchangeably, although each word has its own theoretical resonances. The only distinction I make between the words applies to the infant prior to Kristeva's initial moment of abjection, where the latent self has not yet acquired its subjectivity, or self-

consciousness. I assume the existence of an innate, transcendent self, waiting to be recognized by an Other and dependent upon others for its continued identification and developing subjectivity. An infant self attains subjectivity in the initial moment of self-consciousness, either recognizing itself in a mirror (as in Lacan's formulation) or in responsive interaction with a loving other (as in object-relations psychology). While this process of primary identification is vital in establishing a self's initial subjectivity, a person's family and social environment may encourage or damage the further development or continued existence of this self.

In Chapter 1, I illustrate how women in Henry James' novels *The Wings of the Dove* and *The Golden Bowl* appear to conceive of their selves performatively. This modernist idea that the self is what one displays through outward signs of social class meshes well with James' technique of using other characters as "registers," or centers of consciousness, from which to observe these women. The sense that the self is *what* others see more than *who* one is leads these characters into imbalanced and finally impossible relationships with men. Each is willing to throw herself at a man's feet in order to acquire love accompanied by wealth.

Chapter 2 demonstrates that Tillie Olsen's fiction is closely allied with the abject. Coming out of Olsen's lower class Jewish background and from the perspective of a woman, her work prominently features characters' abjection as revealed in mother/child relationships, grief and death, and the working class poor. Abjection makes Olsen's characters particularly aware of the border lines in human life and, in doing so, shows that it can serve a useful purpose both in leading an individual toward psychological integration and in bringing a community together.

Chapter 3 focuses on several of Vladimir Nabokov's most strange, psychologically abject characters. I argue that he is playing games with selfhood and submitting these characters to philosophical experiments illustrating the century's vital questions about subjectivity. In allowing his narrators to be consumed with abjection to the point of confusing or losing their subjectivity, Nabokov also pushes the limits of fiction by exploring what happens when a character's perception of "I" or "me" disappears or multiplies within a text.

In Chapter 4, I look at the contested idea of the postmodern self as displayed in novels by Don DeLillo. While in *Running Dog* and *Libra* he presents main characters who illustrate the poststructuralist belief in the entirely discourse- and system-constructed self who is no *self* at all, in *Great Jones Street* and particularly in *White Noise*, he holds out more hope that subjectivity can endure even within conditions of postmodern society. Bucky Wunderlick and Jack Gladney find their selfhood anchored in the love of an other. They remain subjects able to be aware of their own abjection rather than becoming *abject* bodies unaware of themselves, uncaring about life, death, or others.

Chapter 5 examines racial abjection in Toni Morrision's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*. I argue that the concept of abjection provides an important means of theorizing racism by linking social reality with psychological experiencing of the self. In an oppressed society, a minority person suffers not only outward conditions of inequality but endures an analogous inner discrimination experienced psychologically. Racial abjection, I suggest, takes place as a self internalizes the recognition of disdain or entire disregard that it is outwardly subject to from the majority as *Other*.

All of the main characters in these works are struggling against a misrecognition which forces them into an identification with the abject. While a child's initial process of abjection in the mirror phase is positive, later experiences of abjection in an older child's or adult's life are often anything but that. Being unloved, debased, neglected, being linked with garbage, being seen as nearly invisible, being reminded of their own death--all lead characters into an uncomfortable malaise regarding their bodily self which both *is* and *is-not* co-extensive with them. Abjection thus foregrounds the borderline in subjectivity between being one's own ***self as subject*** and being ***subject to*** one's social, interpersonal, and physical condition. As Catherine Clément writes, "'I' am nothing but a syncope, a fault line between thinking and being, a subject that is suspended, 'shifted,' fainting" (126). Abjection helps to draw this "fault line" on the map of the self.

"Performers can stop giving expressions but cannot stop giving them off." Erving Goffman

CHAPTER ONE

The Self for Sale: The Failure of Abject Love for Two Jamesian Women

In a psychological study of twentieth-century literature, it seems appropriate to begin with the novelist whose greatest masterpieces were published at the start of that century. For his experiments with narrative technique and points of view, Henry James is remembered as incorporating a psychological approach to literature in a profoundly new way. Furthermore, his literary career spans a time during which philosophy and psychology, economics and politics all experienced a shift in the understanding of what the *self* means. The decades just prior to and just following the turn of the twentieth century, in fact, saw the birth of psychotherapy, sociology, and the intersection of these fields in social psychology.[1]

One dimension of this important transition is explored in Jeffrey Sklansky's book *The Soul's Economy.* Sklansky explains the complex relationship between economics and psychology, between public transaction and understanding of the private individual, as follows:

> For the pioneers of the "new psychology," led by Williams James, John

[1] Jeffrey Sklansky explains that social psychology began with "two of the foremost theorists of the new field around the turn of the century--William James, whose *Principles of Psychology* (1890) remains the single most important American treatise on the subject and the point of departure for virtually all subsequent work, and his leading disciple, John Dewey, whose pathbreaking exploration of the social dimensions of the Jamesian psyche made him the most influential exponent of modern American social psychology" (138). Sklansky's discussion goes on to explain how the "brilliantly self-absorbed" James family had a profound impact upon the psychology William develops (143). His insights describe factors which certainly also contributed to Henry James' own preoccupation with consciousness in fiction.

> Dewey, and G. Stanley Hall, the practical challenge to individual autonomy amid the rise of industrial capitalism posed a philosophical problem as well. The disunity of property and production, experienced in different ways by absentee owners, wage earners, and professionals like themselves, disrupted the whole chain of self-command in classical moral philosophy and political economy. (8)

As an agrarian economy was replaced by an industrial one in which individuals functioned as collective human machinery, so did the nineteenth-century ideal of the autonomous individual--the self-reliant farmer, say--become replaced by a conception of the individual shaped by his or her environment. Social context came to be seen as a defining and even controlling force of individual personality. As Sklansky explains, "The new psychology had discredited both the independent transcendental ego of moral philosophy and the autonomous empirical actor of political economy, supplanting them . . . with a wholly social self continuously evolving in response to its psychosocial environment" (159-60). The word "evolving" here describes a type of social Darwinism applied at the individual level: the psychological evolution produced by one person's continual struggling against and shaping by the social world.

Along with this shift came the tendency to define a person not primarily according to personality or family, but according to the social class of which he or she displays characteristics. Sklansky explains how Hegel differentiates this view of the individual from that espoused by Adam Smith. For Hegel, Sklansky writes, "social recognition" was

> the sole basis of "self-consciousness." Such awareness came not from

> seeing oneself objectively as if through others' eyes, so as to differentiate self from not-self, as in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. For Hegel, recognition meant seeing one's identity fully reflected in that of the group and the group's social spirit wholly manifested in oneself, thereby transcending the very divide between self and other that formed the basis of Smithian autonomy. (155)

In such a theory, the identification and recognition which begets selfhood is thus bestowed on an individual by a collective Other. Understanding of "self-consciousness," then, coming into the twentieth-century, was based in a self's assumption of how well others judged it as fitting or not fitting in to a particular social group. Charles Cooley referred to this as the "the looking-glass self," saying "We always imagine, and in imagining share, the judgments of the other mind" (Sklansky 205). According to Enrico Garzilli, "The American dream, as satirized by writers like Nathanael West in *A Cool Million*, implies that money and possessions encourage a securer sense of identity" (52). Furthermore, this outlook carries with it "an emphasis on possessions which obscures other more human values [and] makes identity the result of opposition to other people" (Garzilli 53). Thus in his *Principles of Psychology*, William James writes that "In its widest possible sense . . . a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account" (Sklansky 148). In an increasingly materialist American society, James lists these self-defining factors not necessarily in order of importance.

Selfhood thus comes to be defined largely by the outward markers of social class

and Thorstein Veblen's idea of conspicuous consumption and waste. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, first published in 1899, Veblen illustrates that the upper class of the Gilded Age, like any uppermost tier in a society, demonstrates "the growth of conspicuous leisure and consumption" and "that the utility of both alike for the purposes of reputability lies in the element of waste that is common to both. In the one case it is a waste of time and effort, in the other it is a waste of goods" (85). The key word for marking social identity is, of course, "conspicuous." Signs of wealth must first be visible and seen before they can serve as indicators of their bearers' identity. This system also produces a group of people who are accustomed to the life of the upper class but do not have the income to maintain such fashionable displays. As Veblen writes, "Wherever the canon of conspicuous leisure has a chance undisturbed to work out its tendency, there will therefore emerge a secondary, and in a sense spurious, leisure class--abjectly poor and living a precarious life of want and discomfort, but morally unable to stoop to gainful pursuits" (42). This description fits a class of which Henry James was well aware.

Social psychology, and specifically the beliefs of his brother William, were strong influences on the work of Henry James. He sought to represent not only the distinct social milieu of his characters--wealthy urban and transatlantic Americans--but also the ways in which social class and environment shaped the goals and psychological motivations of the people he described.[2] Women in this world had high standards to

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[2] This attention to the material and sociological which I believe is noticeable in Henry James' fiction is quite similar to the understanding of psychology set forth by William James. As Joseph Redfearn explains in his article "Terminology of Ego and Self: From Freud(ians) to Jung(ians)," "Writing in 1910, William James distinguished between 'I,' the self as a knower and doer, and 'me,' or 'myself' as known or experienced. He saw no value in studying the 'I' as a knower and felt it should be banished to the realms of philosophy. Comprising the 'myself' as known, James included a material self, which contained one's

uphold. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir describes how standards of feminine beauty have typically forced women into performative presentations of their self:

> Even if a woman dresses in conformity with her status, a game is still being played: artifice, like art, belongs to the realm of the imaginary. It is not only that girdle, brassiere, hair-dye, make-up disguise body and face; but that the least sophisticated of women, once she is "dressed," does not present *herself* to observation; she is, like the picture or the statue, or the actor on the stage, an agent through whom is suggested someone not there--that is, the character she represents, but is not. (533)

Unlike men, who could more easily succeed whether they were married or not, single women needed money to maintain this artifice successfully and uphold their identification with the upper class, and this money was sometimes available only through marriage. Understanding this, I believe, is a prerequisite to understanding the abjection of two James heroines, or anti-heroines as the case may be.

Charlotte Stant in *The Golden Bowl* and Kate Croy in *The Wings of the Dove* are perhaps two of Henry James' most misunderstood characters. Charlotte is blamed for being "the other woman" who tempts the Prince into being unfaithful to Maggie Verver; Kate is blamed for convincing Merton Densher to pretend to love Milly Theale in order to inherit her money. Both have been listed among James' "villains."[3] However, the

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body, one's family, and one's possessions; then a social self, which reflected the way other people see the individual; and finally a spiritual self, which included emotions and desires" (384-85).

[3] Susan Winnett specifically includes Charlotte and Kate in a list of James' villainous characters because of their attraction to material wealth: "The 'villains' of James's fiction (Mme Merle and Gilbert Osmond, Mrs. Brookenham and Vanderbank, Kate Croy and Lord Mark, Charlotte Stant and the Prince, to name a few) . . . are precisely those who succumb to the enticement of the worldly, investing in its dubious rewards instead of regarding it merely as a realm of representational experience" (174). Lee Clark Mitchell also

actions of both women upon which to base such a judgment are most often conveyed through the consciousness or "register" (to use James' word) of other characters. Considering that in the preface to *The Golden Bowl* James explains his "preference for dealing with [his] subject-matter . . . through the opportunity and the sensibility of some more or less detached [,] . . . though thoroughly interested and intelligent, witness or reporter" (vii), I agree with those critics who have taken a careful second look at Charlotte and Kate.[4] More specifically, I believe it is important to consider possible motivations for their abject and even immoral behavior precisely because James, by design, conceals the perspective of these women.

Miss Stant and Miss Croy share, first of all, several significant characteristics. Both are described as beautiful, intelligent women, as social artists who stand out in a crowd. Yet, both are still single, in their twenties, and carry with them the sense of waste, of something unused but "valuable" that needs to be "possessed." Both Charlotte and Kate are dependent upon money to reveal their brilliance; yet each woman, in her respective plot, is in love with a man who does not have the financial means to do justice to her "worth." Despite this impediment to her desired marriage, each woman successfully maneuvers within her social context to maintain an illicit sexual relationship

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acknowledges this view of Kate yet challenges it by reminding us that *The Wings of the Dove* does not clearly reflect her point of view: "Readers assume Kate is driven by little more than self-interest. Why do we ascribe mean intentions to her, given how little we are privy to her thoughts?" (187).

[4] Several critics have pointed out that Kate and Charlotte should be analyzed with greater attention because their stories are not told from their point of view. Mitchell writes, "Kate's perspective vanishes too soon in a novel devoted to her design" and argues that "censure of Kate misrepresents the novel" (188-89). In defense of Charlotte, Hugh Stevens points out that "Following Maggie's lead, criticism has tended to forget Charlotte" (63). He also warns that "an endorsement of Maggie's point of view at the expense of Charlotte's" is "a repetition of the highly skewed mode of perception of the novel, a silencing of the 'other woman'" (67). Similarly, Jean Kimball suggests that "James intended that Charlotte's predicament, the drama of her struggle, be the focus of interest in *The Golden Bowl*" and believes critics should consider

and to gain material wealth. Yet these gains are bought at a great price. Kate announces to Merton, "I engage myself to you forever. . . . I give you every drop of my life" (72). And Charlotte tells the Prince she is "giving [her]self, in other words, away--and perfectly willing to do it for nothing" (69). Are these declarations of self-abnegation to be taken at face value? While viewed by other characters as "valuable" social commodities, are these women so at risk of losing this value that they can give themselves away so cheaply, like goods on a clearance rack?

An understanding of abjection helps to answer these questions. The notion of the abject illuminates the cases of Charlotte and Kate because it describes what they each gain and lose through the act of *ab-jecting*, or "throwing" themselves "away."[5] By adopting a stance of abjection, Charlotte and Kate are able successfully to maneuver and manipulate others to achieve their desires but only temporarily, since abjection, as an in-between state, cannot succeed as a mode of existence. Although each woman gains money and sex, the strategy of abject devotion cannot serve as an effective means of securing love. In their complex sets of desires--for the men they love, for money, and for marriage--both women seek to possess their Other by giving him full possession of themselves and effectively relinquishing their constitution as subjects.

In order to appreciate the magnitude of Charlotte and Kate's strategy, it is worth noticing how strong and attractive they are as individuals. James makes a point of distinguishing each with exceptional characteristics, perhaps because abjection draws

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"the upside-down story which would surely emerge if the action of the novel were considered from Charlotte Stant's point of view" (449).

[5] The etymology of *abject* is given in the Introduction. Martin Jay explains that the word comes from the "Latin *abjicere*, to throw away" (237), and Clifford Davis writes, "as the etymology suggests, the abject represents what is 'thrown out' by the Symbolic" (8).

more attention when enacted by those who initially seem strongest and most self-possessed.

Charlotte is first introduced by Fanny Assingham as "a handsome, clever, odd girl" (30). In the Prince's first meditations on her, he sees a "wonderful, finished instrument, something intently made for exhibition, for a prize" (33). Charlotte's physical beauty is enhanced by her mental acuity and social skill. The Prince notices "the intelligence in her face" that "could at any moment make a circumstance of almost anything" (33). And numerous times characters note that Charlotte always knows how to carry herself, knows how to bring off a situation. She possesses "the knowledge of how and where and the habit, founded on experience, of not being afraid" (32). In her life as Mrs. Verver, Charlotte's social intelligence is allowed even greater expression: "Charlotte was a, was *the*, 'social success'" (224). As Fanny explains, "Charlotte, in her way, is extraordinary. . . . She observes the forms" (277). James even bestows upon Charlotte, again through the words of Mrs. Assingham, his most absolute indication of aesthetic beauty: "If she's charming, how can she help it? . . . [I]t's she who's ***the real thing***" (138, emphasis added). Charlotte is presented as the model, then, the ideal woman, combining beauty, intelligence, and social grace. In this society with such high standards for female behavior and appearance, she is the consummate actress. Indeed, the comment that Charlotte "has acted beautifully" (28) becomes a refrain in *The Golden Bowl*.

In *The Wings of the Dove*, Kate Croy is no less extraordinary. Like Charlotte, Kate moves through society with skill. She "was always sublime" and gave Merton "the benefit of her righting of every wrong appearance" (284). Her "high sobriety and her

beautiful self-command" (355) add to the "measure of her superiority" (372). She also stands out from other women. Merton notices "how inveterately he felt in her tone something that banished the talk of other women . . . to the dull desert of the conventional" (58). When questioning Merton about Milly, for instance, "nobody but Kate could have invested such a question with the tone that was perfectly right" (362). Further, in a London society wherein even friends and family use and are used by each other, Kate maintains a detached freedom. When Mrs. Stringham tells Maud Lowder, "You handle every one," Maud answers, "I don't handle Kate" (248). Kate's social grace gains her the favor of Aunt Maud, the admiration of Lord Mark, and the friendship of Milly Theale. "*Isn't* Kate charming when she wants to be?" Milly asks (239). As Lee Mitchell puts it, "Kate realizes unaided a whole host of desires . . . [;] her assessments bespeak an extraordinary social intelligence" (197).

James, then, invests both Charlotte and Kate with a rare combination of qualities. His portraiture is enhanced in both cases with a suggestion that each woman carries mythical status. These references are further heightened by the isolated status of each woman, orphaned or distanced from family and still not married in their mid-twenties. Merton sees Kate surrounded with "the fine cloud that hangs about a goddess in an epic" (365). Similarly, Charlotte appears to the Prince to have "the sylvan head of a huntress" or perhaps even "a muse" (33). As Jean Kimball explains, "The conversation between the Prince and Fanny builds up to [Charlotte's] entrance with all the intent of any first-act introduction of the star of a play. . . . They make it perfectly clear that she is that vital element in any drama" (467). James' mythical allusions contribute to this sense that Charlotte is a star on stage before this elite society.

This theatrical presentation of James' characters is compatible with the view of selfhood set forth in Erving Goffman's famous work of social psychology, *The Presentation of Self in Everday Life*. Applying the familiar metaphor of the world as a stage and human beings as actors, Goffman explains how the notion of a *self*, or personality, is equivalent to a part played according to various scripts available within a society. Far from determining a person's selfhood, however, such a system in fact reveals a great deal about the person who *selects* what self/part to play from among a cast list of various parts. By presenting themselves in a certain way, people reveal both how they see themselves as well as how they would like others to act toward them. As Goffman puts it,

> When an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect. . . . The others find, then, that the individual has informed them as to what is and as to what they *ought* to see as the "is." (13)

People tell their audience, or society, who they are by whom they choose to play. James' use of the register technique fits well with this notion of the theatrical self by revealing key characters indirectly, allowing others to voice their perceptions of them.

Prior to learning about Charlotte's magnificence, readers are first told by Mrs. Assingham about her loneliness: "She's so lonely. . . . She's extraordinarily alone" (27). Maggie later comments about how well Charlotte handles her solitary status: "She has been brave and bright. . . . She hasn't a creature in the world really--that is nearly--

belonging to her" (127). When the Prince indicates to Charlotte that he expected she would have married by that time, Charlotte explains that it hasn't been for lack of trying: "I tried everyone I came across. I did my best. I showed I had come, quite publicly, *for* that. Perhaps I showed it too much" (40). Whereas Charlotte states this fact rather plainly to the Prince and lightly adds, "Existence, you know, all the same, doesn't depend on that" (40), Maggie presents a different perspective on single womanhood in a conversation with her father. She explains that Charlotte "would have liked for instance--I'm sure she would have liked extremely--to marry; and nothing in general is more ridiculous, even when it has been pathetic, than a woman who has tried and has not been able" (128-29). Charlotte, also talking to Adam Verver, later confirms what Maggie has told him: "I should like to be a little less adrift. I should like to have a home. I should like to have an existence. . . . I want to *be* married. It's--well, it's the condition" (154). Yet what Charlotte wants specifically is not simply marriage but marriage to the Prince. As Fanny tells the Colonel, however, that's exactly what Charlotte can't have: "She might have been anything she liked--except his wife" (50). Readers are initially led to feel sympathy for Charlotte, who seems to make herself abject as a last resort to be the near the one she loves.

Kate, on the other hand, does have the option of marrying her first choice. Unlike the Prince, Merton Densher *is* willing to forego wealth in order to remain with the woman he cares about. Kate is the one who makes money the priority. After seeing her sister, Mrs. Condrip, raising children in squalid circumstances, Kate "couldn't indeed too often say to herself that if that was what marriage did to you--!" (41). The importance of financial means for Kate is further revealed in the first scene during the conversation with

her father. "I'm not so precious a capture," she tells him; "No one has ever wanted to keep me before." Surprised by this, Mr. Croy asks, "You've not had proposals?" And Kate answers, "Not from rich relations" (27). Though Kate is specifically referring to Aunt Maud's offer to "keep" her, the reference to money in her direct response to a question about marriage proposals becomes significant. It foreshadows both her motivation for suggesting that Merton scheme to acquire Milly's money as well as her choice at the end of the novel.

Kate wants love *and* money. Although her desire to be married is not made as explicit as Charlotte's, certain descriptions seem to imply that she too would like to be attached: "At twenty-five it was late to reconsider, and her most general sense was a shade of regret that she hadn't known earlier . . . [;] it gave her the feeling of a wasted past" (35). While she begins to regret that she is not yet married, Kate holds firmly to her own perception of her value. Though in love with a poor man, "she didn't hold herself cheap . . . [;] she wasn't chalk-marked for auction" (22). As Mitchell explains, "The impoverished Croys have convinced Kate to see herself simply as an 'asset'" (200). As the novel progresses, Kate's value is further emphasized by Aunt Maud's use of her. Kate tells Milly, "I *am* . . . on the counter, when I'm not in the shop-window; in and out of which I'm thus conveniently, commercially whisked" (169). The narrator later emphasizes this, saying Kate "was always, for her beneficent dragon, under arms; living up, every hour, but especially at festal hours, to the 'value' Mrs. Lowder had attached to her" (204). If such value were not attached to a suitable man, that indeed would be viewed as a waste of her assets.

This sense of waste is echoed in the experience of Charlotte. Maggie notes the

misfortune of Charlotte's spinsterhood, telling her father, "Isn't it always a misfortune to be--when you're so fine--so wasted? And yet . . . not to wail about it, not to look even as if you knew it?" (130). Charlotte's glossing over of her waste, her ability to behave as if she had not lost the Prince, is analogous to the golden bowl itself. When Charlotte asks the shopkeeper about the bowl "If it's so precious, how comes it to be cheap?" (81), she unwittingly asks an important question about her own choices in the novel. Does it matter if cracked crystal is concealed beneath a gilt surface? Or, as Charlotte asks the Prince, "If it's something you can't find out, isn't it as good as if it were nothing?" (81). But the Prince does find out Charlotte's value. She is his, and the possession does not even cost him his Princess. While Kate delays her marriage until Merton can pay her price, Charlotte holds herself too cheaply, giving her hand to Adam Verver and giving her ***self*** to the Prince.

The characters' easy use of the economic terms "cheap," "value," and "waste" to describe these women--even the women's describing of themselves--demonstrates how fully society's commodity view of selfhood had shaped their understanding of people (or particularly, of women). Since the collective Other of this society operates as the primary source of identification for Kate and Charlotte, then their understanding of themselves is profoundly affected by the selfhood, or lack thereof, which society bestows upon them. Being referred to and referring to themselves with monetary words, these women experience themselves as objects. To a certain extent, feeling oneself an object of the Other is a necessary experience of relationship. As Sartre explains,

> [W]e experience our inapprehensible being-for-others in the form of a ***possession***. I am possessed by the Other; the Other's look fashions my

> body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculptures it, produces it as it *is*, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds a secret--the secret of what I am. He makes me be and thereby he possesses me, and this possession is nothing other than the consciousness of possessing me. (340)

Physically and perceptually different from others, all subjects experience the psychological dissonance of being perceived as an object in another's phenomenological field of vision. I believe what James presents is more than this, however, and instead represents a particularly object-like status conferred upon women--or at least upon upper-class women--of this society. Again, the words of de Beauvoir are appropriate:

> Confronting man woman is always play-acting; she lies when she makes believe that she accepts her status as the inessential other, she lies when she presents to him an imaginary personage through mimicry, costumery, studied phrases. These histrionics require a constant tension: when with her husband, or with her lover, every woman is more or less conscious of the thought: "I am not being myself." (543)

Perhaps it is easier for these women to throw themselves away precisely because society does not allow them to be themselves anyway.

At times James even chooses the word "abjection" to describe the degree of love, involving self-sacrifice, that the Prince has come to expect from females around him. Upon Charlotte's first appearance in *The Golden Bowl*, the Prince reflects on his knowledge of women. He prides himself on being sure of "the doing by the woman of the thing that gave her away . . . equal to her abjection" (35). Charlotte at first succeeds in concealing her continued love for the Prince: "The abjection that was present to him as

of the essence quite failed to peep out" (36). But her devotion to the Prince does not remain a secret for long. Charlotte declares her abjection when she reveals her motive for returning to Fanny Assingham's: "You may think of me what you will, but I don't care. . . . I came back for this. Not really for anything else. . . . To have one hour alone with you" (63). In thus revealing herself, Charlotte risks being rejected by the Prince who she knows is already engaged to Maggie. Yet the narrator explains her reasoning: "The risk was because he might hurt her--hurt her pride, if she had that particular sort. But she might as well be hurt one way as another; and, besides, that particular sort of pride was just what she hadn't" (65). Charlotte's strategy echoes what she will later say about the golden bowl: "I risk the cracks" (255). She thinks of herself as she will think of the bowl; she would rather belong to the Prince even if his ownership splits her apart.

Charlotte's abjection is further revealed in the demeaning, and double-meaning, comments she makes about her intended wedding gift for the Prince and Maggie. As she and the Prince embark on their shopping trip, Charlotte explains, "Mine is to be the offering of the poor--something, precisely, that no rich person *could* ever give her. . . . But absolutely *right*, in its comparative cheapness" (65). Charlotte's intended material gift to Maggie evolves, however, into the impalpable gift of herself that afternoon to the Prince. In one impassioned declaration, she wants to make sure the Prince understands what the shopping trip means to her:

> I want to have said it--that's all; I want not to have failed to say it. To see you once and be with you, to be as we are now and as we used to be, for one small hour--or say for two--that's what I have had for weeks in my head. . . . It was either this or nothing. . . . This is what I wanted. This is

> what I've got. This is what I shall always have. . . . What I want is that it shall always be with you--so that you'll never be able quite to get rid of it--that I *did*. . . . But that I was here with you where we are and *as* we are--I just saying this. Giving myself, in other words, away--and perfectly willing to do it for nothing. That's all. (68-69)

Charlotte here uses the language of possession. She assigns the significance of her actions by naming it. As a speaking subject, she abdicates her self-possession and abjects herself before the object of her devotion. And what Charlotte *wants*, she admits, is for the Prince to recognize and remember this act of abjection, this gift of herself.

In *The Wings of the Dove*, Kate's abjection, though revealed more obliquely, nevertheless can also be observed. The initial descriptions of her intense relationship with Merton Densher demonstrate how unusual the experience is for her: "Never in life before had she so let herself go" (50); "his long looks were the thing in the world she could never have enough of . . . [;] whatever might happen, she must keep them, must make them most completely her possession" (53). For such a self-possessed woman, Kate's need to "own" Merton's looks is extraordinary. In return, before Densher departs for America, Kate declares, "I engage myself to you for ever. . . . And I pledge you--I call God to witness!--every spark of my faith; I give you every drop of my life" (72). Like Charlotte, Kate also wants her loved Other to know that she gives him possession of herself.

As the novel progresses, Kate's abjection becomes more fully illustrated. Before agreeing to pursue Kate's financial plan, Merton tests Kate's devotion by pushing for greater physical involvement. And he discovers that "the more he asked of [Kate] the

more he found her prepared, as he imaged it, to hand out" (194). When Merton asks, "almost in anger, 'Do you love me, love me, love me?'" Kate "closed her eyes as with the sense that he might strike her but that she could gratefully take it. Her surrender was her response, her response her surrender" (196). Narrated through Merton's register, this scene shows his perception that Kate would be willing to endure his violence. He recognizes this as a display of abjection on Kate's part. She is Merton's to do with as he pleases. This illustrates Kristeva's point that "through love, *I* posit myself as subject for the speech of the one who subdues me--the Master. The subjection is amorous, it supposes a reciprocity, even a priority for the sovereign's love. . . [;] in amorous dialogue *I* open up to the other, I welcome him in my loving swoon, or else I absorb him in my exaltation, I identify with him" (*Tales* 94). This reciprocity culminates in his ultimate bargain with Kate: "I'll tell any lie you want, any your idea requires," he tells her, "if you'll only come to me" (294). Densher knows Kate has given him the authority to ask for sexual possession of her body. And she agrees to the bargain.

In his book *The Selfhood of the Human Person*, John Crosby discusses the importance of a person's relationship with herself in determining the well-being of her relationship with others. If one does not care adequately for oneself, then any other relationships, particularly love relationships, are bound to be skewed and pose danger to that person: "It is only because persons are gathered into themselves . . . that is, only because persons stand in themselves, and exist for their own sakes, and in an incomparable sense are themselves and are not any another, and belong to themselves--it is only because of this selfhood that persons can act through themselves" (35). As the choices of Charlotte and Kate unfold within each story, each woman seems distinctly to

lack this sense of "stand[ing] in themselves." Both characters are all too ready to forego their rights as subjects and sacrifice their selfhood in order to achieve the ends that their society prescribes for women. While each woman does at least gain intimacy with the man she loves, James indicates in each novel that the net loss outweighs the experience of passion. Crosby warns against these kinds of choices: "We must not love in such a way that we cease to stand in ourselves and to belong to ourselves; we must not abolish ourselves in favor of the beloved person. . . . We need the strength of subjectivity implied in desiring our own happiness in order not to lose ourselves in a depersonalizing way when we open ourselves to another in love" (111-12). Although James' women present their self-renunciation as a show of strength, as an action they willingly choose, the result of each character's sacrifice is the loss of the love for which they were willing to do anything.

It is also not a coincidence that the enactment of abjection involves the act of sexual union for both Charlotte and Kate. Charlotte's Matcham affair with the Prince and Kate's night spent with Merton in his rooms both serve as the physical representation of the psychological merger that has already taken place. Abjection is necessarily related to the body and often, more specifically, to a subject's attempt to escape from its death-bound body. As Elizabeth Gross puts it, "Abjection is a reaction to the recognition of the impossible but necessary transcendence of the subject's corporeality" (87). In sexuality, abjection may be viewed as the subject's challenge not just to psychological boundaries but to the physical boundary of the skin that separates one person from another. Allison Kimmich discusses the physical dimension of abjection in "Writing the Body: From Abject to Subject." Using the examples of Audre Lorde's experience with cancer and

Paul Monette's writing about homosexuality, Kimmich argues that "the concept of abjection quite obviously grows out of physical characteristics which variously define a person as Other in relation to the normative healthy white heterosexual male subject" (223). More specifically, she points out that "Femininity itself has close associations with abjection because women have traditionally been equated with the body rather than the mind" (231). For Lacan it is the Mother, the feminine, who must be abjected in order for the subject to enter language. As Kristeva writes, "The *death* and the *feminine*, the end and the beginning . . . engross and compose us only to frighten us when they break through" (*Strangers* 185). Thus it is the female body which retains the connotation of the abject, both the comforting fascination with and the dangerous potential of engulfment.

As subjects themselves, the Prince and Densher are doubly fascinated: each is tempted not only by feminine beauty but also by the overt abjection of their object, made explicit by Charlotte and Kate's declarations. In her discussion of the commerce of emotional pain in *The Golden Bowl*, Jennifer Travis writes, "It is particularly the value in Charlotte's sexual body that is of repeated interest in the novel. . . . Amerigo recalls his own holdings in Charlotte in material terms" (846). Yet bodies, even if beautiful and gilded, remain just as cracked as the golden bowl. Travis believes that "it is the fragility of the very surface of things, of all objects and of all bodies, that becomes the distinct measure of all the characters' needs to protect in the first half of the novel" (846). Although the Prince and Charlotte attempt to use her abjection as a means for continuation of their original love, the strategy does not work. As Travis puts it, "sex between [Amerigo and Charlotte] functions, as they claim, to maintain a flawless surface" (847); however, "the wounding of nobody, the fragile bargain upon which all the

relations in *The Golden Bowl* appear to depend, cannot finally suffice" (858-59). The surface of their love and the secrecy of their affair both shatter.

Sex is no more successful a bonding in the case of Kate and Densher. In fact, the night Kate spends with Merton marks the point in the text at which he begins to be more drawn to Milly Theale and to be less under Kate's power. Elissa Greenwald explains this failure as follows: "Merton's attempt to make Kate fully present to him results in a different kind of absence. . . . All he has are memories; Kate's invisible presence in his rooms turns her into a ghost. In his unmediated possession of her, Densher has reduced rather than heightened her presence to him" (187). This dynamic between Kate and Merton seems to be echoed in one of Helga Geyer-Ryan's descriptions of abjection:

> The archaic pull of the abject, the simultaneous revulsion and fascination of fusion, appear in Benjamin's work as an irreconcilable juxtaposition of *Lust* and melancholy in the face of the destruction of the subject and its inwardness. The reduction of the individual to a creature, a doll, an automaton, a machine, a dismembered body, the disembowelment of inner space--all are deeply enjoyed and just as deeply mourned. (508)

In giving her body to Densher, Kate becomes a "doll" to him and also to herself, a detached body that he can temporarily possess but which she has already divested of her subjectivity. Merton cannot experience union with Kate because Kate has abdicated possession of herself. All that remains is her body.

The abject body in these novels renders James' phrase "the real thing" ironic, for such an objectified body has become merely a "thing" and, in its sundering from a person's selfhood, has also, in a sense, ceased to be "real." In his discussion of James'

paradoxical use of this phrase, Kenneth Reinhard's observations help to elucidate the dynamics of physical abjection.[6] He writes, "The 'thingness' of the thing is its sheer proximity, prior to lending itself to cognitive representation, a proximity that demands our ethical response" (120). The presence of another person's body, in other words, makes itself known as a "thing," as a physical object in the phenomenological world of perception. Such a presence also demands a response which Reinhard describes in the language of abjection: "The thing calls on us to take responsibility for its proximity, an obligation that entails both our recollection (of the thing's disappearance) and our mortality (our anticipation of our own disappearance), each not as a concept, but as a reality too close to comprehend" (120). Thus on one level subjects always relate to people as things, as objects outside of themselves, beyond knowledge and control. In recognizing the physical presence of another, a subject is reminded of her own corporeality and her own limits at the boundaries of what is physically and psychologically "opposed to *I*" (Kristeva, *Powers* 1).

Similarly, Crosby recognizes the thing-like reality all people have for one another.

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[6] Reinhard explains the significance of "the real thing" as a recurring phrase and theme in James' work as follows:

> The imbricated problematics of representation and loss repeatedly coalesce in Henry James around the terms "the thing" and "the real thing," from his 1893 tale of that title, to his 1897 novel, *The Spoils of Poynton* (originally called *The Old Things*), his 1899 story "The Real Right Thing," and culminating with his great late novel, *The Wings of the Dove* (1902). The "Jamesian Thing" that links these texts, however, is not the symbolic object of production, desire, and exchange so often central to James' rhetorical and narratological economies, but the object *lost as such*, the traumatic incursion [,] . . . the recurrent "hole" in representation around which, I would argue, subjectivity and textuality collect and are recollected for James. The Jamesian Thing names the object whose proximity is registered only in the penumbra of signifiers left by its withdrawal from the test: thematically, in scenes of mourning, sacrifice, and renunciation, and structurally, in the precession of rhetorical, referential, and intertextual horizons. (116-17)

If Reinhard is correct in his interpretation, then "The Jamesian Thing" or "the real thing" for James has striking similarities to what Kristeva and others discuss as "the abject."

In experiencing others perceptually as objects, humans must balance that reality with a cognitive and emotional response to others as human subjects. Crosby explains as follows:

> Since I who act belong to myself and exist as an end in myself, my actions are not just instrumental means, existing only for the sake of their results; they reflect the selfhood from which they proceed and so are capable of having a meaning that goes far beyond that of instrumentality. . . . I can stay intact in my moral acting only if I know in myself that as subjective person I am not a mere instrumental means for producing results, but am called to realize through my acting entirely non-instrumental meanings that express, among other things, my being an end in myself. (113)

Furthermore, people must be aware of others' obligation to offer them the same understanding. In treating themselves as objects, however, James' heroines invite others to do the same.[7]

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre describes a self's desire for recognition from an other as naturally in conflict with the necessarily thing-like quality of

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[7] Reinhard offers further explanation which applies to Charlotte and Kate's treatment as objects within their social context:

> On the one hand, to refer to something as a "thing" is to gesture towards the world with a linguistic shifter, a piece of pronominal or demonstrative discourse that takes on a "deictic" function: its referent only determined in relation to the individual who pronounces it from a particular temporal and spatial locus. . . . On the other hand, to insist that something is the "real thing" is to *allegorize* and elevate it as the noumenal "thing-in-itself" of Idealist philosophy; at the same time, the iteration of and within the phrase "the real thing" intimates the lingering anxiety that language may in practice fail to express transcendental reality. . . . [T]he phrase "the real thing" remains contingent, indicating both the transience of its own indication and the uncertainty of the thing at which it points. (119)

When Fanny Assingham says of Charlotte, then, that "it's she who's the real thing" (138), her objectifying of Charlotte destabilizes, or renders uncertain, Charlotte's own identity.

bodies: "[B]ecause of the mere fact that I *am not the Other*, his body appears to me originally as a point of view on which I can take a point of view, an instrument which I can utilize with other instruments. . . . Thus the Other's body is radically different from my body-for-me; it is the tool which I am not and which I utilize" (316). In their love for Merton and the Prince, Kate and Charlotte experience these men as physical objects who can be possessed. In inviting their own bodies to be used, they are also using the bodies of their respective loves to gain the social standing they desire. To carry out this plan, these women must have relationships with themselves distanced enough to perceive their own body as a tool. As Sartre explains, "in order to utilize the Other's body to my best interests I need an instrument which is my own body just as in order to perceive the Other's sense organs I need other sense organs which are my own" (297). In using others, a self has already come to recognize its own body as a potential site of use-value. However, Sartre points out the potential problem of such an exchange: "[T]he man who wants to be loved does not desire the enslavement of the beloved. He is not bent on becoming the object of passion which flows forth mechanically. He does not want to possess an automaton" (343). Furthermore, Sartre writes, "In love it is not a determinism of the passions which we desire in the Other nor a freedom beyond reach; it is a freedom which *plays the role of* a determinism of the passions and which is caught in its own role. For himself the lover does not demand that he be the cause of this radical modification of freedom but that he be the unique and privileged occasion of it" (343). In depriving their lovers of their own existential freedom through their planned transactions for a wealthy marriage, Kate and Charlotte preclude the possibility that these business affairs can remain *love* affairs.

Another relevant discussion is found in Jessica Benjamin's *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*. Benjamin describes the balance between selves that is necessary to prevent any love relationship from becoming unequal. The attempts for recognition and limits to control first learned in an infant's experiences with mother and father are later replicated in other love relationships. Benjamin writes: "When I act upon the other it is vital that he be affected, so that I know that I exist--but not completely destroyed, so that I know he also exists. . . . For if I completely negate the other, he does not exist; and if he does not survive, he is *not there* to recognize me. But to find this out, I must *try* to exert this control, *try* to negate his independence" (38). Kate and Charlotte's plans to gain a measure of control over social circumstances they cannot change ultimately backfire. Their situations fit Benjamin's description of a "negative cycle of recognition": "In the ideal balance, a person is able to be fully self-absorbed or fully receptive to the other, he is able to be alone or together. In a negative cycle of recognition, a person feels that aloneness is only possible by obliterating the intrusive other, that attunement is only possible by surrendering to the other" (28). Unable to be alone, each woman seeks "attunement" even if that costs her her*self*. In throwing themselves at the feet of these men, Kate and Charlotte pull against the roots of their own subjectivity. As Clément writes, "to lose oneself at someone's feet is to love them with the deepest love, a love that returns one to the cradle and comes close to the accursed moment of birth" (185)--to a time prior to subjectivity.

Following the declaration of their abjection, Charlotte and Kate continue in that attitude. Both plan to gain more than simply physical love from their self-sacrifice. Charlotte's complex intentions are noted early on by Fanny, who comments to her

husband that Charlotte "doesn't deliberately intend, she doesn't consciously wish, the least complication" (49). Yet despite Charlotte's seeming innocence, Mrs. Assingham remains suspicious: "What's certain is that she didn't come for nothing. She wants . . . to see the Prince again. . . . What does she want it *for*?" (46). Fanny recognizes the multivalence of human motivation, that there's the wanting as well as the wanting *for*. Readers know that Charlotte is in love with the Prince and also that she would like to be married. When the Prince proceeds to marry Maggie and even tells Charlotte that it would "make [him] feel better" if she would marry someone herself (86), Charlotte seems to revise her desires to fit her circumstances. Especially after receiving the letter from the Prince in response to her possible engagement to Adam Verver, Charlotte clearly rewrites her intentions. She "studied [the letter's] contents without a sign" and then, though "the expression of her face was strange," immediately agrees to marry Mr. Verver (170). From that point on in the novel, what Charlotte specifically *wants* remains elusive. As an actress, her motives become more hidden.

Occasionally the narrator points to the presence of Charlotte's unknown motives. For example, in one instance after listening to Charlotte speak, Fanny thinks "so thick were the notes of intention in this remarkable speech" (182). The Prince later notes "the way [Charlotte] looked at him as through the gained advantage of it" (209). The narrator, in turn, hints at Charlotte's intentions yet also emphasizes how hidden they are: "She had her reasons, she held them there, she carried them in fact, responsibly and overtly, as she carried her head, her high tiara, her folded fan, her indifferent, unattended eminence" (174). This description, with its juxtaposition of "reasons" and her proud display of wealth, implies that material gain has become part of Charlotte's motivation. But

Charlotte's attitude of abjection is carried out even after her enjoyment of Verver's money.

In her discussion of *The Golden Bowl*, Susan Winnett analyzes closely Charlotte's words to the Prince on the day of their shopping trip. She explains that they serve the double purpose of both concluding the romance between them and calling the Prince's attention to her attitude of self-sacrifice which will pervade the rest of the novel:

> Charlotte's renunciation of her and the Prince's worldly past is calculated to resonate in the hours of domestic boredom to come. . . . The hour alone with the Prince for which she seems so to have debased herself is to be a conclusion, and indeed the sheer weight of the language she uses to describe the conception and anticipation of this moment gives the fact of declaration the force of finality. . . . It is a brilliant performance. Charlotte asks nothing more than that "it shall always be with" Amerigo that she risked all, gave herself away "for nothing," that her renunciation might be official. Fully conscious that the spectacle of so beautiful a woman performing so abject a renunciation is a memory sufficiently haunting to precipitate a future denouement, she absolutely refuses to compromise its impact by accepting the Prince's offer of a memento. (191)

Charlotte banks on the hope that her initial act of abjection will be a sufficient reminder to the Prince that she is his; that all of her actions, in fact, are predicated upon what he would like her to do. He told her he would like to see her get married. And so she does.

Winnett's analysis is supported by how Charlotte talks about herself following her marriage, with an attitude that seems to sustain and remind others of her humble

resignation. For instance, she tells Fanny, "You can ask me anything under the sun you like, because, don't you see? you can't upset me. . . . Nobody could, for it belongs to my situation that I'm, by no merit of my own, just fixed--fixed as fast as a pin stuck, up to its head, in a cushion. I'm placed . . . . There I *am*!" (179-80). By choosing the metaphor of a pin, Charlotte suggests the object-ive and passive attitude of her abjection. She also emphasizes that in her married state she rarely makes her own decisions. When the Prince asks why Charlotte does not use her carriage when it is raining, she answers, "It makes me feel as I used to--when I could do as I liked" (211). She later tells the Prince that it is up to him how they will spend their day together: "I go but by one thing. . . . I go by *you*" (256). These instances illustrate that Charlotte has relinquished her will, both to her husband and to her lover. Mr. Verver also notices this about his wife. In discussing Charlotte with his daughter, he says, "Whenever one corners Charlotte . . . one finds that she only wants to know what *we* want. Which is what we got her for!" (355). Verver implies that Charlotte's extreme agreeability, her abjection, is part of what made her an attractive wife in the first place. Readers know that Charlotte's self-renunciation is successful when Fanny tells the Prince, "They've connected her with you--she's treated as your appendage" (187). No longer acknowledged as the site of a subject, Charlotte's identity has become attached and subordinated to that of the Prince.

In "Golden Rules and Golden Bowls," William Righter considers the nature of moral choice in this novel and asks of the two couples "Did all of them marry in good faith?" (267). Clearly the answer is "no." As Righter explains, "The hidden agenda of the Prince and Charlotte is partly shocking in the very thought of their having purposes separate from those of the others" (279). Charlotte, in particular, has her own agenda.

She knows the rule in this society, as Righter puts it, that "one buys beautiful people with their eyes open, who tacitly accept being bought" (279). And Charlotte intends to use her purchase to her own advantage: "Verver and Charlotte ease into a prepared destiny which it is Charlotte's pride to make her own, as she prepares to turn to some specious glory her role as victim" (273). Charlotte's plan, however, is not successful. As Righter explains, "Charlotte's defeat is made to appear a victory, a victory necessary to the very self-esteem which is her undoing" (268). Crediting Charlotte with more original innocence, Jean Kimball writes, "Charlotte deliberately puts herself into a false position, with rather an excess of good faith" (457). But even assuming she meant no harm to Maggie or the Prince's marriage, the result is the same. As Kimball puts it, "Charlotte Stant, with all her 'ambiguous possibilities,' walks open-eyed into a situation with all the ingredients for unhappiness. . . . When she agrees to marry Verver, she takes her place in a strange, constricted existence . . . an ironic, inverted Garden of Eden in which the only role for her is that of the serpent" (453). Or that of the abject woman. Perhaps both are just as tempting.

The final appearances of Charlotte, seen from Maggie's perspective, show her mother-in-law caught in the gilded prison of her own abjection and dehumanized in animal metaphors. At one point Maggie envisions Charlotte in a cage made from her "deluded condition" and sees "her companion's face as that of a prisoner looking through the bars" (449-50). In the next chapter Charlotte is "the splendid shining supple creature" who "was out of the cage" (456). And in the most memorable image, Maggie sees Charlotte walking around Fawns a step or two behind Mr. Verver, admiring his collections: "Charlotte hung behind . . . and stopped when her husband stopped," as if he

were "holding . . . the end of a long silken halter looped round her beautiful neck. He didn't twitch it, yet it was there; he didn't drag her, but she came" (491-92). Maggie later imagines she hears "a cry of a creature in anguish" (497) when she remembers that scene. And from that point on she can envision Charlotte only with "that gleam of the silken noose, [her] immaterial tether" (521). Charlotte's abjection gains her an affair with the Prince but a permanent leashing to her husband, who in the end transports her away from Amerigo and to America.

In "Sexuality and the Aesthetic in *The Golden Bowl*," Hugh Stevens discusses how the Edwardian world of the novel sometimes led women into behavior that is akin to abjection. He explains how essential it was during this time for women to get married, pointing out that when "Charlotte notes that the 'position of a single woman to-day is very favourable,'" her "statement is disingenuous in that (as her own progress in the novel indicates) the economic pressure on women to marry was often considerable" (58). As Fanny says to the Colonel, "It *is* always the Prince, and it *is* always, thank heaven, marriage" (57). Because of women's dependence on men to provide them with the state of marriage, Stevens says, "The Edwardian period witnessed a fierce debate over what constituted 'femininity'" (63). He then quotes from Krafft-Ebing in *Psychopathia Sexualis*: "Under the veneer of polite society the instinct of feminine servitude is everywhere discernible" (59). James echoes this popular view of women in his portrayal of Maggie and Charlotte. Stevens explains that both characters willingly enter a bargain of subjection: "In Maggie's imagination her father becomes a Sadean master. . . . With the Prince, too, Charlotte enters a sexual economy that objectifies and suffocates her" (64) and experiences "a banishment . . . not only to American City but also, in a series of

revealing fantasies, to the position of a savage, primal femaleness, the place of the 'other woman'" (63). In an analysis of Maggie's final vision of Charlotte in bondage, Stevens writes about the terms of such abjection: "Charlotte is held in, imprisoned, by the long cord (of bondage), by a finger-ring (of marriage?), by a purse (the body as commodity), by the notion of identity itself, identity seen as restriction rather than growth, an entry into a tight constricting space enclosed by an imaginary master, a femininity defined by lack, castration" (64). Here Stevens' words recalling Charlotte's body as object and identity as a boundary controlled by a "master" all point to her abjection which may have been assisted--perhaps even required--by her society.[8]

Knowing that their every move is judged on a social stage, these women wear masks that society makes available to them. Since James reveals their perspective only obliquely, readers may be left wondering about the "true" feelings or motivations of Kate or Charlotte as *selves*. But selfhood in such a society becomes questionable, as James well knew. Enrico Garzilli, for example, describes the tension between belief in both selfhood and in a determining social context: "Certainly one of the problems in defining identity is the relationship between the self and the many masks which are worn for either

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[8] In this article Stevens also makes an interesting connection between Maggie and Kate/Charlotte: "A comparison of Maggie's progress through the stages of the Oedipus complex with that of Kate Croy or Charlotte would suggest that money, and economic autonomy, can act as a (metaphorical) phallus compensating for feminine 'lack'" (66). By ultimately deciding to fight for her marriage and relinquishing her close ties with her father, Maggie achieves this "progress" by letting go of an emotionally incestuous relationship. Incest, as a primary taboo, is frequently listed as a form of abjection (Kristeva, *Powers* 68). Stevens connects Maggie's movement away from abjection with the image of the golden bowl: "Maggie's renunciation of incest for desire within marriage is an activity suggesting the golden bowl itself--a structure designed to hide its fundamental flaw. This is the very structure of the aesthetic in *The Golden Bowl*. The novel repeatedly portrays the construction of the 'beautiful' as something rooted in the cultural process of exclusion . . . [,] of repudiation. The crisis of representation in the novel arises from the always incomplete nature of this exclusion" (67). In other words, perhaps the crack in the golden bowl is analogous to the split between subject and object, and the golden bowl itself, in hiding that crack, can be read as an illustration of abjection.

public or private acceptance. A person or self can have so many masks and so many public poses that at times he questions which one of these is really himself. Is he the sum total of all his masks or is he none of them?" (75). I believe Garzilli's answer to his own question provides insight into the cases of Kate and Charlotte: "[A]lthough persona and mask seem to suggest the hiding of something, they are as much a revelation as a concealment. In the choice of persona and in the enforced use of mask, the self concomitantly yields something. Every choice of a mask eliminates at the same time the use of another" (75). In choosing the stance of a selfless woman at her lover's feet, each heroine's selfhood is at least partially revealed.

Charlotte and Kate's abjection, then, functions as a dramatic performance to be witnessed by their upper-class social circle. These women's chosen roles highlight their beliefs both that they have value because they are loved by a man and also that their worth depends upon a certain level of material wealth. Goffman explains the class markings which define many social roles: "To *be* a given kind of person, then, is not merely to possess the required attributes, but also to sustain the standards of conduct and appearance that one's social grouping attaches thereto. . . . [A] social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated" (75)--or well acted. His description applies to both women and to the importance of wealth and its staged signs in their social worlds.

In *The Wings of the Dove*, Kate adopts a stance of abjection to achieve these material ends just as Charlotte does. In one sense, Kate's motive is much more obvious than Charlotte's: she wants to marry Merton but only if he is wealthy; since Milly is dying anyway, she wants to use her money. The complexity of Kate's actions, however,

is revealed in an early comment she makes to Milly. Teaching Milly about London high society, she says, "Nobody here, you know, does anything for nothing. . . . Every one who had anything to give . . . made the sharpest possible bargain for it, got at least its value in return" (106, 116). But what is even more surprising is what Kate adds, that this mutual using "might be in cases a happy understanding. . . . People could quite like each other in the midst of it" (116). These comments shed light on how easily Kate is able to "use" those in her life--Aunt Maud, Milly, and particularly Merton. Kate is even honest with Merton about her intentions: "You're what I have of most precious, and you're therefore what I use most" (214).

Merton cooperates with Kate's plan, agreeing to be used for their mutual advantage. His good-will seems to be secured by Kate's attitude of resignation. Her abjection is reiterated through her comments to Merton such as the following: "It's you who draw me out. I exist in you. Not in others. . . . You'll have me perfectly, always, to refer to" (220-21). She reminds him that she has pledged herself eternally to him and that *she* is the one suffering while he pretends to care for Milly. Kate seems almost to intend to make Merton feel guilty by emphasizing the depth of her sacrifice: "I'm taking a trouble for you I never dreamed I should take for any human creature. . . . When you know me better you'll find out how much I can bear" (307, 309). These sentiments are repeated in the final scene of the novel, when Kate suggests that Merton owes her for the abject role she has played: "How do you know . . . what I'm capable of? . . . That's what I give you. . . . That's what I've done for you" (400, 403). Kate finally claims success because Merton has the envelope promising him Milly's money. But her complex motives no longer appeal to Merton. He sees that "she had reasons, deep down, the sense

of which nearly sickened him" (373). The more Merton realizes how important money is to Kate, the more he questions the reality of her love.

In "The Sustaining Duplicities of *The Wings of the Dove*," Lee Clark Mitchell discusses Kate's use of others and herself. He explains that "From the beginning Kate conceives of herself in terms of possession--as someone possessing an attractive grace who realizes she is therefore socially possessed" (191). Like Charlotte, Kate is able to use her social abilities to appear to want only what others want, to renounce apparent self-will completely. The narrator indicates that Milly "should never know how Kate truly felt about anything" (122) and notes Kate's "property of appearing at a given moment to show as a beautiful stranger, to cut her connexions and lose her identity" (132). Mitchell also describes these self-transformations of Kate: "Having recognized the paradox that possessing others involves acknowledging their independence, she achieves interpretive power by encouraging them to express their desires. . . . Acceding to others even as she gives the impression of having a mind of her own, she acquires a compelling aura" (199). While Kate's chameleon mastery of self-deprecation charms others, her habit of changing to suit the situation finally prevents her from returning to her *self*. In giving herself psychologically and physically to Merton, Kate chooses the state in which "possessing one another incurs a certain loss of self-possession" (Mitchell 192)--the state of the abject. As Mitchell points out, "Kate uses herself much as others use her. . . . Her brutality extends to the treatment of her own divided self--the most extraordinary instance of which occurs in the encouragement of her fiancé to marry another" (204). Merton seems unable to reconcile the Kate with whom he fell in love with the woman who not only is willing to use him as a pawn but to sacrifice her own happiness as well.

Kate's abjection also fails because she is competing for Merton's love with Milly who, in dying, achieves the ultimate expression of the desirably abject. In discussing the power of absences in James' text, Reinhard makes several points relevant to an understanding of abjection. He explains that "Kate's calculations fail to take into account the melancholy deposit left in Densher by the destruction of Milly's unread letter, an ashen residue that cannot be put into circulation through their allegories of mourning" (135). Kate, as a living, speaking woman in an attitude of abjection, cannot equal the abject power of Milly, the subject who no longer *is* and who no longer speaks, neither literally nor through the pages of the letter Kate burns. Reinhard further argues that "Kate represents the 'object' of Realism: sexual object, object of knowledge, and commodity that exists at the expense of the repudiation of the thing. Milly takes the place of the 'thing' of Romance: the archaic, disappearing, unsexual pre-object" (139). Reinhard's use of the realistic/romantic polarity to distinguish between Kate and Milly applies to categories of abjection as well. In using others and using herself, Kate remains a *real* subject who employs a stance of abjection for material gain. Milly, however, is the dying/dead female who carries the abject appeal of pre-conscious or post-death non-subjectivity. As Reinhard concludes, "With her death Milly hovers between obsession and oblivion" (139). For Merton, Milly becomes an enshrined illustration of abjection.

If abjection possesses an attraction that is both fascinating and repulsive, then Merton is ultimately most attracted to what is most abject. In Kristeva's analysis she suggests that abjection reaches its most full expression in the intersection of life and death--the image of the dead body:

> The corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached

> upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. The border has become an object. . . . The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. . . . It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (*Powers* 3-4)

In ceasing to be a person and by becoming a corpse and a memory, Milly succeeds in winning Merton's affection. Kate is correct when she tells Merton that he came to love Milly only after her death: "And you're afraid--it's wonderful!--to be in love with her. . . . Your change came--as it might well--the day you last saw her" (402). Kate's final words, the last of the novel, ring with an exclamation point echoing her abjection throughout the novel: "We shall never be again as we were!" (403). It seems easy to blame Kate for that predicament. It was her idea in the first place for Merton to befriend Milly. If she had been satisfied with his love instead of desiring both love and money, she could have been happily married.

In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann outline the tenets of social constructivism. Primary in their discussion is the distinction between society as "objective reality" versus "subjective reality" and, analogously, the knowledge of the self from each epistemological standpoint. As they explain, "The self cannot be adequately understood apart from the particular social context in which [self and organism] were shaped. . . . Man experiences himself as an entity that is not identical with his body, but that, on the contrary, has that body at its disposal. In other words, man's experience of himself always hovers in a balance between being and having a

body" (50). This distinction recalls Charlotte's and Kate's choice to put their own bodies at their self's disposal. The potential for abjection is thus partially founded upon this fundamental split between objectivity and subjectivity which Berger and Luckmann describe. Social constructivism also incorporates elements of Goffman's theories of performed selfhood. As Berger and Luckmann note, "An action and its sense can be apprehended apart from individual performances of it and the variable subjective processes associated with them. Both self and other can be apprehended as performers of objective, generally known actions, which are recurrent and repeatable by *any* actor of the appropriate type" (72). The action of declaring their endless devotion to these men and engaging in illicit sexual union with them carry a specific and powerful meaning in the social context of these women.

Such a reading is complicated, however, by the question of how Charlotte and Kate themselves view their own actions. What is each woman's relationship *with* herself? Berger and Luckmann believe that people often view themselves objectively, as actors, when they are functioning within certain social roles: "The actor, for that moment, apprehends himself essentially in identification with the socially objectivated action. . . . Now a *part* of the self is objectified *as* the performer of this action . . . [;] a segment of the self is objectified in terms of the socially available typifications. . . . Both acting self and acting others are apprehended not as unique individuals, but as *types*" (73). This helps to explain what may seem to be unusually cold and calculated behavior on the part of James' characters. James creates people who do see others, and even themselves, as dramatic manifestations making set appearances in society's tableaux. The danger of the self being wholly constructed by society, however, is also present: "Identity itself . . .

may be reified, both one's own and that of others. There is then a total identification of the individual with his socially assigned typifications. He is apprehended as *nothing but* that type" (Berger and Luckmann 91). If Charlotte and Kate are viewed in such a way by their society and, in turn, by their own selves, then the motivating impulse behind their total abjection is more clearly understood. Further, as Berger and Luckmann point out, "By playing roles, the individual participates in a social world. By internalizing these roles, the same world becomes subjectively real to him" (74). Both women would do anything to maintain the part assigned to them by society because, perhaps, that is all they have come to know as their "real" self. They see their worth, identity, and existence determined according to their recognition within a social context. In both cases, love without money--money to support an adequate social standing with adequate costumes and props--is not a viable social option or actable role. Their positions of abjection are thus perhaps due as much to the acceptable role of women in their society as they are to the result of their specific choices.

In her discussion of moral philosophy in *The Golden Bowl*, Martha Nussbaum takes a sympathetic look at Charlotte and at what she loses through her abjection. At the end of the novel, "Amerigo has refused Charlotte not only his love, but also his response and his vision. He refuses to see her pain; he allows it to remain at a distance," instead of seeing her "as a woman who has arranged her life around her passion for him" (37). Charlotte's loss and pain are perhaps further slighted by the lack of attention they receive in the second part of the book. Through Maggie's consciousness, Nussbaum explains, "Charlotte, lost to our attention, becomes at the end our pagoda. . . . For into that isolation and pain and silence our intelligent conversation and response do not enter" (47).

Nussbaum suggests further that Charlotte's experience raises certain questions about love and the complicated relationships between subjects and their objects: "How much is deep love worth, and under what circumstances is it worth a blinding? What boundaries are we to draw? What priorities can we fix?" (39). Nussbaum calls these "the little girl's questions," belonging to a child who "wants to be told ahead of time exactly what's right and when. She wants to know exactly how much she loves this person, and exactly what choices this entails" (39). But Charlotte's experience of love illustrates that there are no easy answers. Having made herself abject, even child-like, to gain money, marriage, and simply to be near the Prince, Charlotte takes up the position "of an *actress* who finds, suddenly, that her script is not written in advance and that she must 'quite heroically' improvise her role" (39, italics mine). And, as Nussbaum adds, "there's no safety in that, no safety at all" (39). It is easy to feel a measure of sympathy for Charlotte at the end of the novel, but it is hard to forget that she entered her situation willingly and that she, like Kate, got what she bargained for. She ends up married--bound--to the wealthy Adam Verver.

It comes as no real surprise that these love stories do not end happily, in part because these characters have not displayed behavior reflecting genuine love. A legitimate sense of self, a subjectivity based in more than just a mask given to a person by society, is needed before any mutual relationship with another can be established. As Crosby writes, "Everyone knows that in living at the beck and call of one's latest strongest desires one loses the dominion over oneself which is due to oneself as person, and becomes a kind of cripple with respect to personal selfhood" (189). Crosby further describes a sort of healthy dependence which is very different from the abject

dependence displayed by Kate and Charlotte:

> *[T]o want to be happy in the beloved person is a particular way of giving oneself to him or her.* We make ourselves dependent on the beloved person in making him or her the source of our happiness; we put ourselves in need of him or her. . . . I can give myself to another in the sense of willing to need the other for my happiness, only if I am sensitive to my happiness and capable of desiring it. (201)

These two women do not seem to meet the second part of this requirement. Charlotte seemingly believes that her only potential happiness could be in marrying the Prince and, since that is no longer possible, resigns herself to an unhappy existence. The priority Kate places on money in making it equal, if not more important than, being able to marry Merton indicates that she sees him largely as a bargaining tool. Whether or not she loves this tool ends up being beside the point. In choosing to make Merton's body a means to an end, Kate shows that her own end is not mutual love but, rather, fulfillment of a social role. In Martin Buber's *I and Thou* he explains that all people approach every other person as either an "I" or as a "Thou." For Buber, genuine relationship can occur only between two people who each view the other as a "Thou": "No purpose intervenes between I and You, no greed and no anticipation; and longing itself is changed as it plunges from the dream into appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur" (63). In putting wealth and social acceptance on the same plane as love, these characters gain the first two but fall far short of reaching the third.

I do not, however, mean to join critics who judge Kate and Charlotte for their

actions. Discussing ethics in James' novels, Angel Medina points out that "Critics have interminably debated about the 'goodness' and 'badness' of Jamesian characters, the favorable or unfavorable attitudes of the author toward their moral point of view, and the almost perverse ambiguities in these attitudes" (63-64). Yet, Medina concludes, "such discussions about the morality or immorality of James's characters . . . are badly off center" (64). One reason for this is that Charlotte and Kate's stories are not told from their own points of view. Another is that desire, motivation, and choice are seldom simple things in the world of James' fiction. As Medina explains, "The identity of the moral agent is in some way at stake with at least the most momentous of [her] choices," yet her "choices can never be fully justified in the totality of their motives and consequences" (54-55). In other words, the persons of Charlotte and Kate are not synonymous with the collections of actions we see each woman make in her novel. Similarly, as James says near the end of the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, "We are condemned . . . whether we will or no, to abandon and outlive, to forget and disown and hand over to desolation, many vital or social *performances*" (xxiii, italics mine). As characters changing over time, Charlotte and Kate may regret their decisions. Nussbaum argues that James' work, and *The Golden Bowl* in particular, operates "by showing us ourselves as precious, valuing beings who, under the strains imposed by the intertwining of our routes to value in the world, become cracked and flawed. . . . Human beings, like the golden bowl, are beautiful but not safe: they have ideals, but they split" (34). The word "split" recalls the state of abjection itself, that "void which opens up in the realm of the Mothers" and "is the emptiness of the abject . . . in which neither subject nor object exist but rather the pure movement of splitting" (Geyer-Ryan 501). If Charlotte and Kate

are "villains," it is not because of their abjection. Like the flawed bowl, they are flawed characters, humanized by their efforts to shape themselves according to their desires.

In their use of abjection, Charlotte and Kate attempt to fulfill their societal need for money and marriage and their human need for love. Subjecting their will and their bodies to the men they love, they can relinquish their possession of themselves but they cannot change the choices of their loved objects, who are subjects in their own right. Both women experience the limiting social roles available to women within their society. Both are thus also forced to learn the limits of abject sacrifice.

". . . it is never eyes which look at us; it is the Other-as-subject."
Jean-Paul Sartre

CHAPTER TWO

The Luxury of Selfhood: Abject Poverty in the Work of Olsen

While the elite characters of Henry James' drawing rooms are tempted to throw their selves away to secure a marriage at a certain level of wealth, the characters of certain proletarian literature also demonstrate that the self's welfare is in part dependent on material resources.

Since the publication of *Silences* in 1978, Tillie Olsen has received a growing amount of attention. She is recognized for her contributions to feminism as a writer who illustrated economic and patriarchal oppression of women and also as a working-class mother whose circumstances often limited her writing career. Olsen was not prolific. Aside from her poetry and essays, her published fiction consists of the unfinished novel *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* and five short stories: "I Stand Here Ironing," "Hey Sailor, What Ship?" "O Yes," "Tell Me a Riddle," and "Requa I." Several critics have noted the limiting effects of economic hardship of the 1930s on her characters. Mickey Pearlman and Abby Werlock write that Olsen "has forced us to pay attention to the influence of economic circumstance and social class; the meaning of limited time, money, energy, and space on the productivity of women; the nature and pain of imposed silence; and the often debilitating effects of 'otherness' in a society that equates difference with disability, sameness with safety" (ix). Similarly, Mara Faulkner explains, "In the depression economy that prevails in Olsen's writing, not only material goods but also love,

recognition, daily care, time, and the chance to learn and grow are scarce commodities; and one person's or one group's happiness, freedom, and power are almost inevitably achieved at the price of someone else's misery" (156). Characters' personalities are shaped by this sense that there is not enough to go around--neither enough money, enough food, nor enough love.

Many critics have, in turn, noted parallels between material and psychological hardship for Olsen's characters. Anne Trensky writes of "Eva's vulnerability and loss of self" in "Tell Me a Riddle" (512), and in his study of *Yonnondio* Michael Staub suggests that "the struggle for 'selfness' was often nothing less than a struggle for survival" (131). Discussing a rare moment of joy for the Holbrook family, Lisa Orr says, "Having momentarily recovered a selfhood, Anna can offer her children the kind of mothering that gets lost in caring for everyday needs. . . . It is not motherhood that limits women, it is motherhood in these economic circumstances" (223). An examination of thwarted selfhood in Olsen's work, specifically in *Yonnondio*, "I Stand Here Ironing," "Tell Me a Riddle," and "Requa," demonstrates that economic abjection has a direct bearing upon the experience of psychological abjection as well.

Although *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* was not published until 1974, Olsen began the story in 1932 and "worked on [it] intermittently into 1936 or perhaps 1937," as she explains in a note following the novel (157). The composition process itself was interrupted by the birth of Olsen's first child and ultimately put on hold due to her financial struggles as a single mother. Even the book's "finished" form, as it was assembled in the early 1970s, does not represent the text Olsen originally set out to create. Her comment at the conclusion of *Yonnondio* indicates that the text itself is

abject. Incomplete and cast off, the book never became what she intended, as Olsen almost apologetically explains: "Reader, it was not to have ended here, but it is nearly forty years since this book had to be set aside, never to come to completion. These pages you have read are all that is deemed publishable of it. Only fragments, rough drafts, outlines, scraps remain--to tell what might have been, and never will be now" (155). The novel is characterized by a textual fluidity that seems to reflect the abjection of its characters. Sentence fragments, numerous italicized words, and a stream of consciousness approach occur frequently. The abandoned, patchwork nature of *Yonnondio*'s text seems a fitting frame for her characters' impoverished, patchwork lives. Describing the capitalist roots of such suffering, Georges Bataille writes, "The rich man consumes the poor man's losses, creating for him a category of degradation and abjection that leads to slavery. . . . But the masters . . . are preoccupied . . . with showing that they do not in any way share the abjection of the men they employ" (125). This comment also helps to explain the vital importance of social presentation in the upper-class world of Henry James' novels.

Yonnondio is the story of the Holbrooks, a working-class family in the 1920s midwest, forced to relocate repeatedly in the effort to escape poverty. During jobs in a Wyoming mine, on a Nebraska farm, and finally in a meat-packing house in Kansas City, Jim Holbrook illustrates how the pre-Depression laboring class was ground down into a life of seeming futility and personal depression. As R. D. Laing writes, "[E]mptiness and futility can arise even when a person has put himself into his acts . . . if he has put himself into something and has been accorded no recognition by the other, if he has become convinced that he is not able to make any difference to anyone, no matter how much he

puts himself into his acts" (*Others* 72). Feeling unrecognized by society and always working at jobs where he is as interchangeable as a piece of machinery, Jim suffers from a sense of his life's meaninglessness.

In Chapter 1, an interlude about Andy Kvaternick, an immigrant also working in the mine with Jim, illustrates the dehumanizing effects of such labor: "And no more can you stand erect. You lose that heritage of man, too. You are brought now to fit earth's intestines, stoop like a hunchback underneath, crawl like a child, do your man's work lying on your side, stretched and tense as a corpse. The rats shall be your birds and the rocks plopping in the water your music. And death shall be your wife" (13-14). Linking the miner's posture to that of a hunchback, a child, or the dead, the narrator suggests that such work is ultimately degrading to those performing it. Mining is "abject" labor since it takes place underground, in darkness, forcing its workers to crouch in the position of animals. As Kristeva explains, "The abject confronts us . . . with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*" (*Powers* 12). Jim's experience with this job affects his life at home and treatment of his family: "For several weeks [he] had been in an evil mood. The whole household walked in terror. He had nothing but heavy blows for the children, and he struck Anna too often to remember" (15). Thus, the dehumanizing circumstances of Jim's mining work are converted into anger and hatred that he inflicts upon his family.

The first lines of *Yonnondio* establish that children raised in a mining town grow up in an environment that forces an early acquaintance with death: "The whistles always woke Mazie. They pierced into her sleep like some guttural-voiced metal beast, tearing at her; breathing a terror. During the day if the whistle blew, she knew it meant death"

(9). The first noises she hears in the morning are always mixed with the terrors attending her father's job. As Mazie hears Jim leave for work one day, the narrator describes "all the sounds of the morning weaving over the memory of the whistle like flowers growing lovely over a hideous corpse" (10). An imaginative and optimistic child, Mazie looks for beauty in the midst of such circumstances. But, her environment continually confronts her with tangible reminders of her ostracized, abject community: "Mazie lay under the hot Wyoming sun, between the outhouse and the garbage dump. There was no other place for Mazie to lie, for the one patch of green in the yard was between these two spots. From the ground arose a nauseating smell. Food had been rotting in the garbage piles for years" (12). Olsen uses the visceral stench of rotting food as a metonymic reminder of this family's neglected, seemingly rotting lives. Marked by literally abject material--garbage and excrement--this community also marks its children as abject, waste products. As Pearlman and Werlock argue, in *Yonnondio*

> the images of bowels, outhouse, dump, and stench resonate, emphasizing a pivotal message: that one of the repressions that always accompanies poverty is demarcated by the oppression of a certain place, or, in this case, the sense of not place. Poverty means, simply, that there is no safe place, and therefore no safety--a state from which the impoverished are always noticeably excluded. (40)

This sense of "not place," of being cast out of healthy or safe community, is one of the ever-present elements of the abject environment within Olsen's novel. Scenes in *Yonnondio* often call up Kristeva's description of the abject as "[t]he repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and

muck," as well as "refuse and corpses" which "*show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (*Powers* 2, 3).

The Holbrooks' hardship, and particularly society's challenge to their subjectivity, is replayed on a smaller scale through Mazie's point of view. According to Pearlman and Werlock, "she is her mother's left and right hand, and, as her mother's closest ally, she also receives the almost constant residue of Anna's anger and frustration" (46). Since Anna is always busy attending to three younger children, Mazie tries to seek the reassurance and love she needs from her father. She follows him to work one day, thinking, "'All the world a-cryen and I don't know for why. . . . Maybe daddy'll know--daddy knowen everything.' The huge question rose in her, impossible to express, too huge to understand. She ached with it. 'I'll ask Daddy.' To ask him--to force him into some recognition of her existence, her desire, her emotions" (16). The narrator's description here of Mazie's desire to be seen, to be recognized as an individual needing care and love, is reminiscent of an infant's need for affirmation from a parent. As Lisa Orr puts it, "repeatedly she seeks confirmation from those around her that she is a human being" (223). When Mazie is met, however, with Jim's gruff reply, readers know her need for love has not been met: "'You little brat,' he said, the anger he had felt still smoldering in him. 'What're you runnin away from home for? Get back or I'll skin you alive'" (16-17). By not granting her desire for attention and love, Jim casts off--abjects--Mazie. When he later, in a kinder mood, tries to reconnect with her at home, his daughter is the one who refuses to recognize an emotional bond: "Mazie sat still the evenings staring into the stove, and when Jim tried to woo her to smiles, she gave him such objective ones, they froze him" (26-27). Her "objective" gazes here suggest her father's

failure to reinforce Mazie's sense of subjectivity in their past interaction.

This feeling of not mattering, of barely being, is further emphasized by Mazie's response in Nebraska when she sees farm girls with their more successful families: "When there are gay little girls sitting high and proud in the buggies, ribbons in their hair blowing a long streamer in the wind, shame and envy shudder over her, and she draws herself together to make herself nothing, to lose herself in the faded gray dress on her body" (41). The contrast between the other girls with their hair ribbons and Mazie in only her "faded gray dress" emphasizes the distinction between classes in this community. As Thorstein Veblen explains, "our apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at the first glance" (167). The girls in the buggies presumably wear these decorative ribbons, examples of conspicuous and unnecessary ornamentation, in addition to owning dresses which are much brighter and newer than Mazie's.

Furthermore, Mazie's desire "to make herself nothing" is rooted in her shame, her understanding that just as she sees these other girls with their families, they see her as well. Sartre describes shame as based in a self's knowledge that it is apprehended by an Other: "shame . . . is shame of *self*; it is the *recognition* of the fact that I *am* indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging" (237). Furthermore, "the Other accomplishes for us a function of which we are incapable and which nevertheless is incumbent on us: *to see ourselves as we are*" (330). Mazie comes to know her own poverty by seeing others look at her as if she is an impoverished girl. John Crosby emphasizes the importance and power of this outside recognition, particularly for a child:

> It seems rather that I exist from the roots of my personal being towards

> others and with others; *this* is why they play this large role in mediating me to myself. I cannot simply say to those who do not accept the self which I am, "You are wrong, I have in reality a self worthy of acceptance," and then proceed to live, unimpeded, a full self-acceptance--as if they were in error about the date of my birth and I were holding fast to what I know to be the true date. It is rather the case that I exist in such solidarity with them that their rejection of me is a real assault on me, it creates a serious (even if not an absolutely insuperable) obstacle for my relation to myself. (119)

Mazie cannot help but be affected by others' attitudes towards her.

Mazie's thwarted selfhood, her wishing to be "nothing," begins to change only when their neighbor, Old Man Caldwell, gives her the attention she has been longing for. Caldwell sits outside with Mazie, teaching her about the stars and giving her advice about the difference between living and existing. To help this child who has spent her life looking down at the ugly residue of the material world, he seeks to shift her gaze upward to the philosophical and metaphysical realm. Yet shortly before his death, even as he lovingly says "Whatever happens, remember, everything, the nourishment, the roots you need, are where you are now," Mazie is described as sitting "with a sense of non-being over her--of someone other than she sitting there timeless, suspended in a dusky room . . ." (50). It seems that perhaps her psychological growth has been permanently stunted and that Caldwell's care has arrived too late in her development to make a difference. In wanting Mazie to look skyward and see the beauty of the stars, Caldwell seeks to introduce her to the sublime, to what Kristeva describes as "a *something added*

that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparkling" (*Powers* 12). Not recognized by her society and barely recognized by her own family, Mazie is too acutely ashamed of herself to hear Caldwell's instruction fully or understand her own potential to encounter the sublime.

Further evidence of this shame occurs when, after seeing her mother endure another impoverished pregnancy that winter, Mazie's thoughts wander into a soliloquy comprised of abject images as she sits outside with her brother Will:

> Ugly and ugly the earth. Patches of soiled snow oozing away, leaving the ground like great dirty sores between; scabs of old leaves that like a bruise hid the violets underneath. Trees fat with oily buds, and the swollen breasts of prairie. Ugly. She turned her eyes to the sky for oblivion, but it was bellies, swollen bellies, black and corpse gray, puffing out baggier and baggier, cloud belly on cloud belly till at the zenith they pushed vast and swollen. . . . The blood and pain of birth. Nausea groveled. (55)

Her disturbing thoughts then turn to violence, and "she beg[ins] to hit Will, hard, ferocious" (56). The scene becomes one of Mazie's own labor, her giving birth to pain and ultimately inflicting upon her brother the self-hatred and abuse she has received from their parents. Again, one of Crosby's descriptions of damaged selfhood applies to Mazie: "The unconditional acceptance of me by another person, or by the entire social milieu in which I live, is all-important in enabling me to accept myself. If all the significant others in my life refuse to accept me as the self that I am, then I will be crippled in my relation to myself" (119). This crippling is evident in Mazie's cruel abuse of her brother, a younger child who has done nothing to provoke her.

At the opening of the next chapter, the Holbrooks are living in Kansas City, in a city landscape no less abject than the rural one they have fled:

> Myriad and drumming, the feet of sound move always through these crooked streets, trembling the shoddy houses, jerking the skeleton children who scream and laugh so senselessly to uneven rhythms they themselves know not of. . . . A fog of stink smothers down over it all--so solid, so impenetrable, no other smell lives beside it. Human smells, crotch and underarm sweat, the smell of cooking or of burning, all are drowned under, merged into the vast unmoving stench. (60)

Just as in the mining town, the sights and smells of this community remind the Holbrooks that they are part of an unwanted segment of their society--the "foul lining of society," as Kristeva puts it (*Powers* 20). At school Mazie and Will are confronted with others who appear as neglected as they are. These children are described with "faces mad and tired and scared and hungry and dead and their eyes like they want to eat you up" (63), and their nationalities, listed on the chalkboard by their teacher, are reminders of different terms for the racially and ethnically outcast during this time in Kansas City: "Read the funny words on the blackboard," Mazie thinks, "Na-tion-al-it-ies American Armenian Bohemian Chinese Croatian . . . Irish French Italian Jewish Lith . . ." (63). Once again the Holbrooks feel thrown into a scrap heap of similarly ostracized families who are relegated to working in the meat industry's slaughterhouses. Jim again finds himself doing "abject" labor, this time soaked with animal blood and death.

The latter portion of *Yonnondio*, told more from Anna's point of view than from Mazie's, shows a mother too tired and abused to have anything left to give her children.

Almost as the fulfillment of a prophecy, Anna experiences words the midwife spoke after helping to deliver her fifth child: "Life's no bottle of perfume. I'm tired enough to die" (58). In their cramped, un-air-conditioned house in the city, Anna continues to fulfill her duties as wife, mother, and housekeeper while her own strength diminishes to a dangerous level: "Into her great physical pain and weariness Anna stumbled and lost herself. Remote she fed and clothed the children, scrubbed, gave herself to Jim, clenching her fists against a pain she had no strength to feel" (70). Mara Faulkner argues that Jim's sexist attitude toward Anna strains her sense of self, as well as their marriage, to a dangerous degree. Pointing to a moment when Jim is essentially forcing Anna to have sex not long after the birth of Bess, Faulkner writes, "Anna becomes the victim of Jim's ravenous hunger and the two actions part of the same meal. As Olsen's context makes clear, Jim hungers not for food or sex, but for his manhood; or, more accurately, he hungers for the human dignity that is being taken from him" (41). The dehumanization created in Jim by his series of unsuccessful jobs leads him, from his own place of abject need, to approach Anna with a violent hunger too great for her to fill. As Faulkner explains, however, Anna has no choice but to do her best to fulfill the needs not only of her children but of her husband as well: "Firmly entrenched in the sexist attitude that women are good for nothing but sex and childbearing, Jim refuses to see that each succeeding pregnancy devours more of Anna's health and energy--more of herself" (41). Following this scene of marital near rape, the narrator gives clues that Anna is once again pregnant while her body is still depleted and recovering from the youngest baby's birth.

Months later, after a painful miscarriage, Anna is described as having had nearly to sever the connection between her mind and body simply to survive. She has become

"a gaunt Anna who could not understand this body of hers that tired so quickly and quivered like a naked nerve; this stranger self. One minute her old competence and strength; the next: addled, nervous, brutal, lost. Not managing, having to give under, to let things go. Any effort wearing her out; everything an effort" (108). Her impoverished circumstances and continual inability to satisfy the basic physical needs of her youngest children shed further light on why Mazie and Will have been left to care in so many ways for themselves.

In one of the most beautiful scenes of the novel, however, the children are reconnected with Anna when she takes them on a spontaneous outdoor quest for leafy greens to eat. On a visit to the community clinic Anna had seen a sign saying "*The Wheel of Nutrition: One Serving: Green Leafy Vegetables Daily*" (114). With sudden effort to provide better nutrition, Anna takes her kids on a long walk out of the city, through a suburban neighborhood, and finally into an open, grassy field filled with dandelions. The natural landscape is portrayed here as more nurturing to the self. As Mazie watches her mother begin picking the flowers and sucking the juice from them, she notices that "a remote, shining look was on [Anna's] face, as if she had forgotten them, as if she had become someone else, was not their mother any more" (117). The constrained self of motherhood falls away from Anna, and she is transformed into the girl who used to play outside. Mazie, acting maternal herself, is at first frightened by the change in her mother and "felt like yelling, in rancor, in fear . . . 'Ma, come back'" (117). Anna's reverie continues, however, and she is next depicted sitting under a tree with her children, singing and wearing a distant smile on her face. Soon, instead of wanting to command her mother to return to her proper role, Mazie is also able to relax into the role

of a child and enjoy a rare moment of abundant nurturing. Leaning against Anna, with Anna stroking her hair, Mazie regresses into an infant's state of symbiotic union with its mother:

> [A] fragile old remembered comfort streamed from the stroking fingers into Mazie, gathered to some shy bliss that shone despairingly over suppurating hurt and want and fear and shamings--the Harm [sic] of years. . . . Mazie felt the strange happiness in her mother's body, happiness that had nought to do with them, with her; happiness and farness and selfness. . . . The fingers stroked, spun a web, cocooned Mazie into happiness and intactness and selfness. Soft wove the bliss round hurt and fear and want and shame--the old worn fragile bliss, a new frail selfness bliss, healing, transforming. . . . The air and self shone boundless. (119)

The repetition of "self" and "selfness" in these lines shows Olsen's concern with the complex boundaries between a mother and her children. Anna's children enjoy the most relaxed and fulfilling closeness with her, both emotionally and physically, when they feel their mother become most distant and different psychologically from the mother they know--the woman who struggles against poverty. Anna's forgetting of her abject circumstances allows Mazie, her eldest and most adult-like child, to collapse her own boundaries in the comfort of a protected psychological space. When the climactic moment ends, with Ben saying "I'm hungry" and Jimmie yelling "Watch me jump" (119-20), Mazie feels her mother return to the limits of a constrained and difficult motherhood: "*Between a breath, between a heartbeat, the weight settled, the bonds reclaimed.* . . . The mother look was back on her face, the mother alertness, attunement, in her bounded

body" (120). With so many children and so few resources, Anna's cold separateness from them is a strong and rigid distance she must maintain in order to survive.

The importance of this scene to *Yonnondio* has been noted by other critics who see in it an crucial portrayal of selfhood. Faulkner, for example, writes that Anna's moment of relaxation becomes a source of strength that Mazie can draw from and share: "She is so radiant and so loving that Mazie is drawn into her transformed and transforming world. Olsen's description of this moment--of Anna and Mazie moving in perfect harmony, mother and daughter but also two separate and momentarily whole selves" (155). Similarly, Elaine Orr connects this moment of reinforced selfhood to the broader issue of community within Olsen's work:

> The boundaries of self and other, of human and human, are transcended. Even the narrative perspective seems to spring from the earth or to emanate from within the fused and mystical center of being embodied by mother and daughter. . . . The transcending quality of the passage then--its evocation of presences and hopes buoying up the universe--respects the boundaries of self. One does not lose oneself in this harmony; one finds oneself, or one *is* oneself both in separateness and community. (64)

Anna's more defined sense of self in this scene allows Mazie to renew her child-like dependence upon her. Paradoxically, Mazie's own selfhood is renewed through this union, after basking in her mother's full attention. Positive descriptions like this in *Yonnondio*, although few, display bonds of love and family that perhaps outweigh material hardship. Even in the midst of great economic deprivation and family strife, the Holbrooks' moments of human transcendence sometimes nearly override the novel's

proletarian concerns.

Details in the last part of the novel, then, are important in re-establishing the ugly realities that Anna and her children must return to after the climactic scene in the dandelion field. The Holbrooks' home is enveloped in an atmosphere as abject as ever, as the narrator clearly indicates: "And now the dog days are here, the white fierce heat throbbing, when breathing is the drawing in of a scorching flame and the pavement on the bare feet of the children is a sear; when the very young and the very old sicken and die, and the stench cooking down into the pavements and the oven houses throbs like a great wave of vomit in the air" (129). And Jim's packing-house job is as dehumanizing as his original position in the mines was. The new "Beedo" system at his plant, intended to increase worker productivity, seems to speak "by rasp crash screech knock steamhiss thud machinedrum. Abandon self, all ye who enter here. Become component part, geared, meshed, timed, controlled" (133). People are only automatons in such a job, interchangeable objects not recognized for anything valuable in and of themselves. Even Mazie and her mother, despite their moment of transcendent bonding, return to the conflict of daily life. When Mazie tries to make perfume out of flower leaves, reminiscent of the perfumed afternoon outside with her mother, Anna throws out the corked jar thinking it is garbage and later asks, "How should I a-known it was supposed to be perfume you wanted to save? It was dirty-smelling stuff stuck in the cupboard where it didn't belong" (143). This perfume bottle acts as substitute for Mazie's own *self* here. Her valued possession viewed as garbage and tossed aside, Mazie is left as abject at the novel's end as she was at the beginning. Further, though *Yonnondio* remains an unfinished novel according to Olsen, four possible endings have been found in her notes.

All four are negative, the most tragic of which has Anna attempting suicide.[1]

Decades after she had worked on the original drafts of *Yonnondio*, an older Tillie Olsen began her career as a successful writer of short stories. Her experiences with politics and publishing expanded her education, but it was Olsen's experience with motherhood that would lead to her most powerful and famous stories.

"I Stand Here Ironing" (1956) is the narrative of a mother reviewing her failures and successes in child-rearing. As if speaking to a present listener, a school counselor or teacher who cares about the child's welfare, the mother/narrator is focused on explaining what mistakes she might have made in raising her oldest child, Emily. The family history is recounted, however, with a corresponding emphasis on the fact that she had always tried to do the best job of parenting that she could. I agree with Joanne Frye in categorizing the entire impetus of the narrative as the result of a ***healthy*** parental abjection, or separation, from her child. According to Frye, this mother

> is, in other words, setting out to assess her own responsibility, her own failure, and finally her need to reaffirm her own autonomy as a separate

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[1] Michael Staub focuses his discussion of the novel in what he calls "the struggle for 'selfness' through speech" (131). Staub places Olsen's work in the tradition of "1930's 'consciousness-raising' literature," but finds it primarily valuable as a feminist text: "What distinguishes *Yonnondio* . . . is its presentation of a working-class feminism that defends the human rights of all working women to be freed from abusive relations within their families and communities and to achieve what the novel calls 'selfness' through speech" (131). Tracing Mazie's comments during the story, Staub particularly notes moments of silence when it would be appropriate for her to speak up in her own defense. "Mazie's speechlessness results in her identity confusion," Staub writes (132). And of her frightening encounter with Sheen McEvoy early in the novel, Staub argues that Mazie's "inability to speak both results from and causes an ill-defined sense of self" (133). Not only does sexist-imposed silence affect the development of Mazie, but it also contributes to the difficulties faced by Anna. Focusing on the right to free speech in empowering women, Staub argues that the novel suggests that those who are not listened to within society are pushed toward death. For such women as Anna, for example, "to be denied an audience that cares to listen, or fails to listen, [these] women--and particularly poor women--will die or descend into madness" (131). Staub's prediction, then, fits with the ending for *Yonnondio* that would have Anna committing suicide. Furthermore, his analysis demonstrates how sexism and difficulty using language--due to trouble in speaking or in being heard--may be causes and/or effects of abjection.

> human being who cannot be defined solely through her parental role. When she identifies the patterns of isolation and alienation between herself and her daughter, she is further probing the awareness of her own separateness and the implicit separation between any two selfhoods. (130)

Though far from the ideal parent, this mother recognizes her own failures as merely part of the many imperfect circumstances, outside of her control, that shaped her daughter's life.

Only nineteen when Emily was born, the narrator saw that her baby was beautiful, happy, and "a miracle" (10). She loved her "with all the fierce rigidity of first motherhood" (10). Following what "the books then said," the young mother obeyed prescriptions for breast-feeding: "Though her cries battered me to trembling and my breasts ached with swollenness, I waited till the clock decreed" (10). However, left by the father to raise the baby alone, she had to return to work and leave Emily with a babysitter. The narrator recalls how anxiously she would return home from work: "I would start running as soon as I got off the streetcar, running up the stairs, the place smelling sour, and awake or asleep to startle awake, when she saw me she would break into a clogged weeping that could not be comforted, a weeping I can hear yet" (10-11). Even in infancy, Emily failed to receive sufficient maternal care to foster the development of a healthy selfhood. As Faulkner writes, "Those words, *clogged* and *clotted*, suggest feelings or imaginative and loving impulses trapped inside, souring and becoming poisonous rather than nourishing for the self and others" (118-19).

Emily's desperate cries gave way to an unusual and silent compliance when she was a toddler. The narrator implies that, early on, the daughter gained a sense that her

mother's life was difficult and that it was her job to bear those circumstances without resistance. Recalling how there was "never a direct protest, never rebellion" from Emily during the typical tantrum years, the narrator wonders, "What in me demanded that goodness in her? And what was the cost, the cost to her of such goodness?" (12). Such questions form the counterpoint of guilt that runs alongside the narrator's defense of Emily's upbringing. The sense of guilt is reinforced when the narrator remembers an old man in their building telling her, "You should smile at Emily more when you look at her," and she wonders, "What *was* in my face when I looked at her? I loved her. There were all the acts of love" (12). One question raised by the story, then, is whether all the *acts* of love, in and of themselves, can prove the reality of a mother's love for a child. Remembering that it was only with her later children that "it was the face of joy, and not of care or tightness or worry that [she] turned to them," the narrator seems to understand why "Emily does not smile easily" (12); it is because "she was a child seldom smiled at" (20).

Emily's reserved demeanor is contrasted with her surprising gift in acting and comedy. As her mother explains, the adolescent's "face is closed and sombre, but when she wants, how fluid. You must have seen it in her pantomimes, you spoke of her rare gift for comedy on the stage that rouses a laughter out of the audience so dear they applaud and applaud and do not want to let her go" (12). While genuine emotion seems lacking in Emily, the backdrop of her personality functions well as a blank slate upon which faked or imitated emotions are the more easily effected. Faulkner suggests that perhaps it is Emily's lack of personhood that leads her to seek such identification with the gestures of others: "Pantomime is a stealthy way of trying on someone else's face, cough,

or way of moving, a way of searching for hidden links between themselves and the people around them" (101). Similarly, Rose Kamel believes the girl finds an escape from her lack of personality in pantomime: "when she tries and fails to authenticate herself, she escapes into another's role" (61). Furthermore, in acting well or making the audience laugh, Emily receives communal affirmation and love from the crowd's applause. The continued clapping and not wanting "to let her go" indicate acceptance as well as her desire for continued connection--a sharp contrast to the lack of attention she received as a small child. Emily even emphasizes this emotional payoff when she proudly calls her mother at work, crying with joy, to report winning the school talent show: "Mother, I did it. I won, I won; they gave me first prize; they clapped and clapped and wouldn't let me go" (19). Following this recollection, her mother's thought again ponders the sense of recognition, not acquired in her childhood, that Emily gains through the love of the clapping crowd: "Now suddenly she was Somebody, and as imprisoned in her difference as she had been in anonymity" (19). Just as Kate Croy and Charlotte Stant are dependent upon their own acting skills to be "Somebody" in their society, Emily needs similar recognition from a crowd.

The change in her daughter on stage is further noted when the mother describes the first time she sees Emily perform: "I only recognized her that first moment when thin, shy, she almost drowned herself into the curtains. Then: Was this Emily?" (19). From a selfhood that barely exists to a fully realized if borrowed personality, Emily's transformation upon the stage is evidence that she functions from a psychological place of abjection. If, for social constructivists, every person acts out selfhood on the "stage" of everyday life, then Emily's disorder is rooted in being able to display this selfhood

only on a literal stage with an audience overtly recognizing her as a star. She is capable of more connection in an imagined situation with an unspecified, collective Other than in a real situation with specific members of her family. Such identity achieved from the outside, belatedly, is flimsy at best. As Joanne Frye argues, "a human being cannot rely on the perpetual presence of external seeing eyes to validate her own authenticity as a separate self. . . . Consequently, Emily's achievement of external validation as a gifted performer of pantomime cannot be expected to overcome her isolation" (130). Actresses, in other words, cannot remain on-stage (except in James' novels), and their off-stage life may then be empty of independent selfhood.

The next key to understanding Emily's personality comes in learning how her life changed with the birth of her sister, Susan. Emily was "delirious with the fever that comes before red measles" when her mother went to the hospital for a week to have Susan (13). When the narrator returned home, Emily "did not get well . . . [,] stayed skeleton thin, not wanting to eat," and continually "had nightmares" (13). The exhausted mother of the newborn was too tired to attend to Emily's fears at night and recalls, again with guilt, "Twice, only twice, when I had to get up for Susan anyhow, I went in to sit with her" (13). Emily's extended illness eventually led her mother to send her to a convalescent home where, according to a clinic's advice, her daughter could "have the kind of food and care you can't manage for her" (13-14). The juxtaposition of love with food here further emphasizes the theme of abjection, of what the self must ingest or take in, in order to survive. Although the narrator explains again that she had the best intentions in sending Emily away, she now realizes that it may have caused her daughter more harm than good. On holidays when parents were allowed to visit, the convalescent

home sought to keep children from getting too close to them, forcing the children to remain on balconies and to talk to their parents only from a distance: "The parents stand below shrieking up to be heard and the children shriek down to be heard, and between them the invisible wall 'Not To Be Contaminated by Parental Germs or Physical Affection'" (14). Even the one friend Emily seemed to have in the home was sent to a different location. Emily's words yelled down to her mother that week, explaining the other girl's absence, echo the major problem with the children's home: "They don't like you to love anybody here" (14). Not only did the child not receive the physical care her mother hoped would be provided there--"Each visit she looked frailer" (15)--but she clearly received even less emotional care, less love, than she ever had at home.

After Emily returns to the family, her mother's efforts to bond with her are thwarted by the girl: "I used to try to hold and love her after she came back, but her body would stay stiff, and after a while she'd push away. She ate little. Food sickened her, and I think much of life too" (15). The physical rigidity and distance Emily attempts to maintain with her mother are indicators of the emotional distance she already feels. The body closed off to food again recalls the state of the abject as well. The narrator's attempts to reconnect are further impeded by the presence of Susan; she seems to imply that sibling rivalry began at Susan's birth and has been an issue in Emily's life since then: "I have edged away from it, that poisonous feeling between them, that terrible balancing of hurts and needs I had to do between the two, and did so badly, those earlier years . . . [,] each one human, needing, demanding, hurting, taking" (16). Again, her voice implies regret and shows the guilt that now colors her memory of Emily's upbringing. As Pearlman and Werlock write, "even now, some 10-17 years after the events she

recollects, a curiously flat tone inheres in the mother's reminiscences; perhaps this results from the armor that not only enabled her to survive but that protected her from being overwhelmed by guilt" (55). The narrator continually seems torn between implicitly apologizing for not being an adequate mother and defending that she did the best job of parenting she could.

This tension is most overtly illustrated near the end as the narrator reiterates her points by summarizing circumstances that limited her ability to be a good mother to Emily:

> I will never total it all. . . . Her father left me before she was a year old. I had to work her first six years when there was work, or I sent her home and to his relatives. There were years she had care she hated. . . . She was a child of anxious, not proud, love. We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth. I was a young mother, I was a distracted mother. There were the other children pushing up, demanding. . . . There were years she did not want me to touch her. She kept too much in herself, her life was such she had to keep too much in herself. . . . She is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear. (20)

Ultimately this mother balances her parenting mistakes with a reminder that Emily was also the product of a deprived environment. She explains a sort of truce she has reached with herself, accepting her parenting failures, accepting the personality of her daughter, and acknowledging that Emily is now an individual who can make of her life and experience what she will. The final sentences, though far from optimistic, indicate resolution that the narrator has found in her own relationship to Emily: "So all that is in

her will not bloom--but in how many does it? There is still enough left to live by. Only help her to know . . . that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron" (20-21). She concludes her narrative by hoping that her daughter will have a life of more self-determination, more independence, than she herself did as a young, poor single mother.[2] Though still speaking to this representative from Emily's school, the final lines come across almost as a prayer.

Reflecting an existentialist understanding both of time and of other people, this mother recognizes her limited ability to understand fully the past or to know another person. Just as for Sartre, "the Past is my contingent and gratuitous bond with the world and with myself inasmuch as I constantly live it as a total renunciation" (117), the mother narrates her past self and her daughter's according to the perspective of her own memories. In *Selfhood and Authenticity*, Corey Anton elaborates on the existential phenomenological view of both self and time: "I am once-occurrently bound and woven into a historically situated location which holds me uniquely in its thrownness; I am

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[2] Interpretations of "I Stand Here Ironing" often deal with its narrative perspective and the mother's method of recalling past people and events that she worked to suppress, perhaps even to forget, for years. Constance Coiner, for example, writes that the narrator "cannot, in language, fully demarcate herself from Emily or from those whose lives became entangled with Emily's in the past" (76). In letting her own story become one that records what others, including Emily, have said to her, "the narrator," Coiner concludes, "recognizes that multiple voices and memories constantly threaten to engulf her" (76). Coiner sees the narrator's lack of selfhood not only in her past but also as she tells her story and uses language to shore up her psychological boundaries against the attacks or questions of others. I agree that the narrator describes herself as an abject mother in years past, cast down by economic class and material hardship, barely sustaining enough selfhood of her own to nurture selfhood in her children. At the time of narration, however, she seems to be a different woman from the young mother she can remember being.

I agree, rather, with Joanne Frye in seeing the story as the product of a strongly individuated mother. As the narrator considers the balance of attention given to Emily and Susan, Frye believes that she demonstrates understanding of the psychological complexities implicit in parenting: The mother "asserts her own recognition not only of an extreme sibling rivalry but also of the inevitable conflict in the separate self-definitions of parent and child. Gauging the hurts and needs of one human being against the hurts and needs of another: This is the pattern of parenthood. But more, it is the pattern of a responsible self living in relationship" (129). It is also the story of a mother assuming the separateness of a child in the effort to understand the personality of that child.

situated within concrete relations with particular others and am the bearer of a given historical tradition. . . [;] each person is the bearer of thrown and projected horizons of possibilities given their concrete dispersal in the socio-historical event of world" (79). Every unique self is shaped by unique setting coordinates of time and place which have a distinct and unavoidable role in that self's development. As time goes on, potential always opens outward toward the future but closes over a past that, obviously, cannot be changed: "The world and our place in it can be radically different in the future or in the present, but neither it nor we could have been different: both have become what they are in once-occurrent existence" (Anton 78). Anton's further description of time seems to reflect the same sort of understanding that Olsen's mother/narrator herself has reached:

> The past that already happened could not have been otherwise. That is what it means to say that it is past. The weight of such a claim is that, looking back on our own lives, we could not have done other than we did. If we try to suggest this is not so, we pretend that we were not there, or that we have an alibi who can answer for our acts. Of all the things I already have done in my life none of them could I have not done. I did them. (139)

In retelling and claiming all of her own actions, and even mistakes, as a young mother, this narrator portrays her own defined sense of self, standing apart from her daughter while still caring deeply.

Olsen's ultimate message about selfhood, I believe, is made especially clear by the mood of resignation, acceptance, and quiet hopefulness at the story's end. As Frye explains,

> There cannot be--either for parent or for story-teller--a final coherence, a final access to defined personality, or a full sense of individual control. There is only the enriched understanding of the separateness of all people--even parents from children--and the necessity to perceive and foster the value of each person's autonomous selfhood. Though that selfhood is always limited by the forces of external constraints, it is nonetheless defined and activated by the recognition of the "seal" each person sets on surrounding people and the acceptance of responsibility for one's own actions and capacities. (132-33)

I agree with Frye that what readers take away of most value from Olsen's story is a message about *selfhood* itself. Despite the material hardships faced by the narrator, as the teller of this tale she is displaying a motherhood as good as it gets. Any "damage" done to Emily, then, is not far removed from the damage or pain inflicted upon any child in the process of individuation. The difficulties of growing up poor are complicated here by the difficulties of simply growing up to be a human individual.

This understanding of the story also reflects the view of object-relations psychology. The infant's body, in its first encounters with the outside world, negotiates times of recognition with moments of frustration. As Elizabeth Wright explains, "It is this interaction that establishes 'object-relations,' the structurings 'projected' outwards and 'introjected' inwards which form the pattern of a self's dealing with the world, including other people" (80). According to D.W. Winnicott's studies of children playing, "The self is here itself a transitional object, testing out its reality, not in a private fantasy, as was the case with Klein, but in an intersubjective structure of play" (Wright 94).

Likewise, Martin Buber writes, "The development of the child's soul is connected indissolubly with his craving for the You, with the fulfillments and disappointments of this craving, with the play of his experiments and his tragic seriousness when he feels at a total loss" (79). This playing is akin to what Emily is doing on stage when she participates in a *play* in front of an audience. While Emily is certainly late in reaching this stage of development and her impoverished childhood unquestionably does affect her selfhood, her development may be viewed as only delayed rather than permanently harmed as her mother fears.

Olsen's understanding of parents' power to shape their children psychologically is also revealed through the great amount of respect she grants to her children characters. She reminds readers that children are people already forming a relationship with their self, for example, by allowing Mazie's point of view to control the first part of *Yonnondio*. "For Olsen," Faulkner writes, "children are not tools of any ideology, and she accords her young characters personhood by making their inner and outer worlds as weighty as those of her adult characters" (25). In the novel and in "I Stand Here Ironing," the children are active participants, responding to their environments and asking, both verbally and nonverbally, for the various types of sustenance they need from their parents. Even the baby at the end of *Yonnondio* is given a part to play when she joyfully makes a loud noise by dropping the lid of a fruit jar on the kitchen floor: "I can do. Bang! I did is on her face. . . . Centuries of human drive work in her; human ecstasy of achievement; satisfaction deep and fundamental as sex: *I can do, I use my powers; I! I!*" (153). In attributing this agency to an infant, Olsen points to the centrality of Lacan's mirror phase. According to Catherine Clément,

> [I]t is in the depths of this weakness, when he is not yet speaking, that the child is captivated by himself in the mirror, anticipates the complete figure of what he will be later, and prefigures his completion by recognizing himself as Subject, he, me, I, an identity not to be confused with the other. . . . For the mirror phase allows the baby to make a major leap. He recognizes himself simultaneously as a unique individual and as part of this "all" into which he has been born, the world of people. Even before the sudden appearance of language, here is the step of the "imago," the image of self, the first form of the subject. (255, 119)

In calling attention to herself, this baby shows her awareness that she, too, is a person and part of this family, a subject demanding her own unique recognition.

Olsen's concern with the theme of parenting is also representative of her focus on human potential and the possibility for positive change. Her own experience raising children showed Olsen the immense malleability of human beings. As Elaine Orr argues, "The human infant as well as the exhausted mother of children is emblematic in Olsen's world of the hoped for and healing experience of human to human unfolding and becoming. The miracle of life, of renaissance and transformation, is rooted in the human necessities of caretaking, nurturance, and encouragement" (xv). Furthermore, Orr connects the power Olsen sees in parenting to the sort of social power she looks for as a proletarian writer: "When in her notes Olsen writes, '[It] is through having known babies, my own and those of others, my profound belief comes in what is in the human being to be,' she reflects an attitude that may be called religious and political" (36). Parenting thus serves for Olsen as society's original example of and prescription for how to care for

its members. Orr points out that "as Olsen records it, mothering is experienced both as an alienation (in that it exhausts one's personal energies toward the reproduction of others' lives) and as a yield (in that Olsen's vision of what human beings can be grew out of caring for her own daughters)" (76). Just as the abject infant must be recognized and affirmed in order to acquire a healthy subjectivity, those abject within society need recognition and support in order to overcome the state of being socially outcast. Parenting, and specifically motherhood, is thus a metaphor which foregrounds both sacrifice and reward--the two necessary ingredients, for Olsen, to foster growth within a family or society.

"Tell Me a Riddle" (1961) is another story in which Olsen portrays impediments to that growth by showing gulfs that exist between members of a family. In this case, however, the mother is approaching death and her children are grown adults, struggling with marriages and children of their own. The story again displays complex dynamics between family relationships, abjection, and love, as Eva's death is something that she can share neither with her children nor with her husband of nearly fifty years. The synchronic shaping of a self by its family and a family's constitution by its member selves is described by Daniel White and Gert Hellerich: "The structure of familial discourse generates the form of the individual, either 'normal' or 'deviant,' and, furthermore, just as the structure of the family is significant for the formation of the individual so also the configuration of an individual's discourse becomes a commentary on the family" (80). This point helps to elucidate the tension manifest in "Tell Me a Riddle" between Eva's thoughts about her family and their actions and speech towards her.

In their discussion of the story, Pearlman and Werlock suggest that its primary theme is "the mothers' dilemma, which is a microcosm of the larger human riddle of the conflicting demands of self and others" (96). The question that the "Riddle" of the story's title points to, they argue, is the same as this "larger human riddle": "How does one balance one's individual needs with the responsibility of caring for others?" (100). This question is nearly presented by Eva herself during her deathbed ramblings: "Paul, Sammy, don't fight. Hannah, have I ten hands? How can I give it, Clara, how can I give it if I don't have?" (123). What selves ask of others, and what they are able and willing to give of their selves to others, remains one of the most important issues in Olsen's fiction.

The first pages of "Tell Me a Riddle" reveal an elderly woman, Eva, arguing with her husband, David. He wants to sell their home and move into a retirement community; she wants to remain in their home. When he argues the social benefits of sharing life with others, she lashes out, blaming him both for his personality and for the way their marriage changed hers: "'You trained me well. I do not need others to enjoy. Others!' Her voice trembled. 'Because *you* want to be there with others. Already it makes me sick to think of you always around others. Clown, grimacer, floormat, yesman, entertainer, whatever they want of you'" (75). Eva's list of names for her husband is a response to his frequent, often sarcastic name-calling of her: "Mrs. Word Miser" (73), "Mrs. Enlightened! Mrs. Cultured! . . . Mrs. Unpleasant" (78-79). While her arguments focus on the irony that finally, after forty-seven years, her husband is claiming to care about her needs and desires, David's fighting words often seem to attack the identity of his wife herself. Pointing out the advantages of moving into a retirement center, he says

"You could lock yourself up to smell your unpleasantness in a room by yourself--for who would want to come near you?" (78). Thus, David is dismissing his wife both by implying that she would be an outcast in that community and by describing her personality with the negative, visceral metaphor of an odor.

Eva's struggle to claim and maintain her selfhood is given added poignance as details of their impoverished marriage are revealed. Her husband's worries about money during retirement seem insignificant when she remembers her struggles to cook for and clothe a large family during difficult, poor years. In addition to material costs, those years were emotionally expensive as well. After raising seven children, "She would not exchange her solitude for anything. *Never again to be forced to move to the rhythms of others.* For in this solitude she had won a reconciled peace" (76-77). The narrator emphasizes the large cost of motherhood, the selfhood weighed down by too many close relationships and constrained into the selfless personality of a mother: "*Being able at last to live within, and not move to the rhythms of others,* as life had helped her to: denying; removing; isolating; taking the children one by one; then deafening, half-blinding--and at last, presenting her solitude" (77). Solitude is here presented as a self's vacation, a space wherein a mature person can take a break from meeting the desires of other needy selves and follow no dictates but her own.[3]

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[3] Joanne Trautmann Banks points out that wife- and mother-hood put Eva's *self* on hold for many years: "The old woman in 'Riddle' had largely based her identity on her service to others, rather than on her own primary needs. . . . She has had to work out her identity in the parentheses, as it were, between other people's utterances. She has found her self in life's interstices. . . . [T]hus there are major discontinuities in her experience of her self" (162-63). Eva demands solitude at this stage, Banks argues, in order to repair the strains life has inflicted upon her own selfhood: "She will fill in some of the gaps in space and time that have prevented her from having a solid self. She will attempt to connect the prose of her life as a beleaguered mother and wife with the poetry that somehow still fuels her" (164). At least that is how Eva intended to spend her remaining days.

The quiet solitude Eva planned, however, is interrupted by a physical threat to her life. Her stomach cancer, before it is diagnosed, is portrayed as "a ravening inside, a pull to the bed, to lie down, to succumb" (79). When children and husband have finished making demands on her, Eva's body begins needing its own attention. Her illness ends the argument about moving into the retirement community and sends the elderly couple on a final vacation to visit their children and grandchildren. Rose Kamel interprets the cancer as a metaphor for the emotional starvation Eva endured as nurturer to her husband and family for so many years: "Eva's ties to husband and children are a source of bonding as well as bondage. The symbiotic relationship unfolds early in the story before Eva's stomach pains and fatigue are diagnosed as symptoms of inoperable cancer" (66). Furthermore, Kamel connects Eva's experience to the particular struggles of Jewish mothers.[4] Making a similar argument, Bonnie Lyons also notes the relationship in Olsen's Jewish tradition between motherhood/nurturing and the body/physical hunger:

> For Olsen the physical body makes the spiritual condition manifest: disfigurement, mutilation, and especially starvation are body images or ideas employed repeatedly to reflect both self-estrangement and estrangement from the world. Generally, hunger, eating, and feeding (nurturing) are the pivotal experiences that directly link the mother/child relationship on the one hand to the Jewish radical political vision on the other. (144)

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[4] Kamel quotes Erika Duncan thus: "In Jewish literature by *women*, mothers are the 'bread givers' who try to make feeding into a replenishing ecstatic act. But the mothers are themselves starved in every way, sucked dry and withered from being asked almost from birth to give a nurturance they never receive. They are starved not only for the actual food they are forced to turn over to others, but for the stuff of self and soul, for love and song" (68).

This understanding adds significance to the numerous details about the family's former poverty within the story, as well as to Eva's own disavowal of practicing Judaism. The connection between food and the abject is also revealed here. The hunger Eva and David felt during their early years in America has its parallel in their status as revolutionary exiles who remain different even in a free country. As Banks argues, Eva "is an 'outsider' not only because of her gender and her class, but also because of her Jewishness. Even within that tradition, she is an outsider, an atheist who spits on religion's conventions as oppressive" (163). Eva thus fits numerous descriptions of "the other" which Kristeva enumerates in *Strangers to Ourselves*: "The one who does not belong to the group . . . the *other* . . . can only be defined in negative fashion. . . [,] the other of the family, the clan, the tribe. . . [,] the heathen, the heretic . . . according to soil and . . . according to blood" (95). Eva has grown accustomed to being viewed in the role of the *abject*.

Faulkner also points to the metaphoric importance of hunger in "Riddle." Referring to Eva's question, "In America, who starves?" (76), Faulkner writes, "The ironic answer to this question is that mothers starve even in America and even long after they have stopped being responsible for their children and no longer have to contend with physical hunger" (45). She goes on to explain the resonance between hunger/starvation images and the psychological dynamic of relationship between two individuals:

> In Olsen's fiction, the language of hunger almost always holds two elements of her basic paradigm folded within one image: starvation, greed, and something close to cannibalism on the one hand, and a passionate give-and-take that replenishes body and spirit on the other. For Olsen,

> literal and figurative images of hunger express the healthy, essential needs of every part of the human psyche and of the human community, becoming a wedding of body and spirit and a powerful force drawing people out of isolation toward each other. (57-58)

Thus Olsen recognizes hunger, both physical and emotional, as a human drive pushing people beyond individuation and into connection with others.

Feeling she has nothing left to feed her family, Eva dreads the round of visits to her children and does not understand her husband's kinder treatment toward her. No one has told her that she is dying. While staying with her daughter Vivi, who has just had a baby, Eva must confront memories of her own children as infants. The recollection is painful. She is reluctant to hold her new grandchild and then responds coldly when forced into physical contact with the child: "A new baby. How many warm, seductive babies. She holds him stiffly, *away* from her, so that he wails. . . . (*A long travel from, to, what the feel of a baby evokes.*) . . . Now they put a baby in her lap. Do not ask me, she would have liked to beg. . . . Unnatural grandmother, not able to make herself embrace a baby" (91-92). Eva's hard-won rest in her own subjectivity is so tenuous that bonding even with a new grandchild poses a threat she is afraid to negotiate.

The narrative, merging with Eva's stream of thought, then turns to a defense of her past mothering experience, reminiscent of thoughts voiced by the narrator in "I Stand Here Ironing":

> It was not that she had not loved her babies, her children. The love--the passion of tending--had risen with the need like a torrent; and like a torrent drowned and immolated all else. But when the need was done--oh the

> power that was lost in the painful damming back and drying up of what still surged, but had nowhere to go. Only the thin pulsing left that could not quiet, suffering over lives one felt, but could no longer hold nor help. On that torrent she had borne them to their own lives, and the riverbed was desert long years now. Not there would she dwell, a memoried wraith. Surely that was not all, surely there was more. Still the springs, the springs were in her seeking. Somewhere an older power that beat for life. Somewhere coherence, transport, meaning. If they would but leave her in the air now stilled of clamor, in the reconciled solitude, to journey to her self. (92-93)

Eva's thoughts on motherhood echo the dangers and strains portrayed as attendant to that role in Olsen's other work. Children deprive mothers of selfhood, or at least require the temporary cessation or relinquishing of that selfhood, in order to meet the high demands of love and nurturance required by a needy infant. Despite the love Eva feels for her children and the overpowering love, "like a torrent," that she felt while raising them, she seems relieved at this stage of life to be free from what she ultimately views as the enormous emotional burden of motherhood. Aside from abjection produced by material constraints, the abjection attendant upon a mother's necessarily selfless role--though certainly needed, positive, and even chosen--is still both a temptation and a threat to Eva as a grandmother. In Kristeva's words, it is "a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (*Powers* 13).

Olsen does not present the experience of motherhood as one-sided, however. An

infant's one-way reception of love and lack of individuation is balanced with a powerful, ecstatic surge of physical and emotional caring in its mother. When near her grandchildren, the felt danger of being returned to that intense love is combined with the jealousy Eva seems to feel in watching Vivi begin the process she can never repeat herself. The grandmother sees Vivi "in the maze of the long, the lovely drunkenness," with "the old old noises: baby sounds; screaming of a mother flayed to exasperation; children quarreling; children playing; singing; laughter" (96). A reminder of her age, her mortality, and years separating her from the joy of first motherhood, this grandchild is the site of such intense love and memory for Eva that it is almost an object of torture. Even as she has been cultivating her solitude and enjoying the long-awaited freedom from the burden of others, the baby, in its small, physical helplessness, carries the power to knock all of those psychological barriers down. As the narrator explains, contact with the infant produces a phobic reaction of avoidance in the grandmother: when placed next to "warm flesh like this that had claims and nuzzled away all else and with lovely mouths devoured; hot-living like an animal--intensely and now; the turning maze; the long drunkenness; the drowning into needing and being needed," she thinks, "Not that way. Not there, not now could she, not yet. . . . And all that visit, she could not touch the baby" (93). Even Vivi's house, filled with children and the activity of a young family, itself becomes a symbol of the neediness Eva still feels compelled, mother-like, to respond to: "*She could feel* [the house] *like a great ear pressed under her heart. And everything knocked: quick constant raps: let me in, let me in. How was it that soft reaching tendrils also became blows that knocked?*" (95). In such descriptions Olsen portrays abjection's ambivalent nature through a mother's push toward and pull away from the intensity of

family bonding. As Kristeva explains, "abjection is above all ambiguity . . . it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it . . . [;] abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger" (*Powers* 9). Powerful enough to swallow her self, the maternal love called upon by this baby's dependence remains dangerous and inviting.

Eva is also forced into an abject uneasiness as old age and illness increase her awareness of her body. In her discussion of "Tell Me a Riddle," Sara Culver argues that the physical depletion Eva feels due to battling cancer contributes to her distance from the grandchildren: "Her body can no longer tolerate the voracious demands of others, and since for her to acknowledge the need of the other is to feel compelled to fill it, she must turn away" (44). The woman's lack of physical strength is combined, however, with perhaps an even more powerful psychological battle. Eva's behavior, Culver suggests, demonstrates her attempt to preserve her own ego at this stage of life: "It is important . . . for [Eva] to remember what brought her to where she is now, how she came to be this person. . . . [;] she has literally forgotten who she had been before her children came" (43). Eva's efforts to remember that younger self are seen in her scattered memories of being a revolutionary in Russia and an activist during her early days in America. When she and her husband visit Mrs. Mays, an old friend who shared this former life, her sudden attack of crying is met with Mrs. Mays' calm reminder, "Remember your advice, easy to keep your head above water, empty things float. Float" (106-07). This advice advocating a calm egolessness, the peace of keeping an "empty" head in order to "float" through difficulty, is no longer possible for Eva, however. Her deep breathing is interrupted by seeing pictures on Mrs. Mays' apartment walls, reminding her of her own history: "Everywhere pictures foaming: wedding, baby, party, vacation, graduation,

family pictures" (107). Eva cannot forget the interval of time and family that separates all of them from who they once were. Of Mrs. Mays' current life, Eva thinks, "Thirty years are compressed into a dozen sentences; and the present, not even in three. All is told: the children scattered; the husband dead; . . . And now one room like a coffin" (105, 107). The visit to an old friend, intended to encourage Eva, becomes the catalyst forcing upon her, at last, the knowledge "that she was dying" (108). Confronted with Mrs. Mays' reduced circumstances and changed physical appearance--living alone in a tiny apartment, growing obviously closer to death--Eva is spurred toward her own immanent fall into pure abjection.

Eva's emotional isolation, her push away from children, grandchildren, and even her husband, is matched and finally superceded by her dying body, its becoming literally abject through the progression of cancer. Ironically, in the latter half of the story, the personality of Eva, her selfhood, emerges more fully as it is put into relief against deteriorating flesh. For example, the vibrant flowers sent by her children and her pleasure in seeing them form a sharp contrast to the decaying face Eva sees in her mirror. When Phil places one in her hair, "she looked at the pulsing red flower, the yellow skull face; a desolate, excited laugh shuddered from her, and she pushed the mirror away--but let the flower burn" (112). The resurgence of Eva's self is also evident as she and her husband walk along the ocean before going to visit Mrs. Mays. After being "ill on the plane" and "lay[ing] ill for days in the unfamiliar room" (102), Eva comes alive at the seashore: "Patting the sand so warm. Once she scooped up a handful, cradling it close to her better eye; peered, and flung it back. And as they came almost to the brink and she could see the glistening wet, she sat down, pulled off her shoes and stockings, left him

and began to run. . . [;] and already the white spray creamed her feet" (102-03).[5] This setting allows Eva to regress to a child's playfulness and somewhat forget all the relationships and circumstances that have come to define her. Perhaps feeling this close to the earth's elements, to sand, sky, and water, also helps her to accept the elemental nature of her own body. Furthermore, since the ocean is often associated with the powerful pull of the abject feminine, Eva could be seen here as returning to an infant's state of secure and joyful bliss in the arms, or on the shore, of the self's original womb.

Following this scene, however, Eva's body once again becomes constraining. Language eventually fails her as she struggles against the limits of a dying body. As Jeannie, her granddaughter who is a nurse, stays with Eva during her final days, the old woman's comments become a mixed commentary of past and present, speaking to those alive and dead, giving Jeannie pieces of herself that barely fit the puzzle of the grandmother Jeannie knows:

> Have I told you of Lisa who taught me to read? . . . I was sixteen; they beat me; my father beat me so I would not go to her. . . . To her, life was holy, knowledge was holy, and she taught me to read. They hung her. Everything that happens one must try to understand why. (112)

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[5] Elaine Orr reads this scene as a powerful reminder of both physical limitation and spiritual renewal: "The image is inspiring, but the witness of the scene is dying. Clinging to the sand, she is both the life that ventured from water to land and the life which, by becoming dust again, will replenish the earth" (110). The natural cycle portrayed by a dying woman at the ocean is countered, Orr believes, by Eva's living and joyful actions there: "On the other hand, she begins her singing in the rain, and she is reunited with her child self, her true self, at the edge of the ocean" (111). That "truest self," Orr goes on to say, is "that powerful stream ***in her*** that makes her a transcendental being" (115). The contrast between a mortal body and the immortal person is thus emphasized in this scene. The body, finally, is abject. The spirit, or self, is not.

> Yes, Jeannie, at your age my mother and grandmother had already buried children. . . [;] yes, Jeannie, they danced, and for all the bodies they had they might as well be chickens, and indeed, they scratched and flapped their arms and hopped. (113)

Eva's freedom of speech becomes a window into memories and relationships that constituted her secret sustenance in previous years. In seeming solitude, she in fact experienced herself as related to important people of her past. Coiner points out that her identity had an underground root system of deep connection with others: "Eva had announced her desire for solitude, but ironically she returns in her reverie to the time when she was engaged with others in a revolutionary movement. . . . Her babble is a communal one; she becomes a vehicle for many voices" (78). Coiner goes on to argue that the story presents a model for a communal selfhood in Eva's stream of thoughts: "Olsen's display of individual heteroglossia, the fragmenting of voices constituting a self and that self's interdependence with others, become one means by which her work offers alternatives to bourgeois individualism" (75). Although Eva is a relatively isolated character in this story, her voiced subconscious thoughts reveal how she sees herself as fundamentally connected to other people. Thus while language may eventually seem to fail Eva in communicating thoughts to those immediately around her, it remains a source of connection to people who helped constitute her long-ago-constructed and long-dormant identity.[6] Even while dying in a cancerous, already-abject body, Eva remains a

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[6] Similarly, in a feminist interpretation Jean Pfaelzer argues that "In *Tell Me a Riddle*, language itself is the site of struggle" (3). Eva's early activism, followed at first by years of silent family participation, and at last by a return in old age to voiced selfhood, illustrates a pattern of silencing enforced by society upon many women. According to Pfaelzer, "Verbal contact with other expressive and rebellious people who celebrate their historical and ethnic heritage transforms Eva's identity. Her language and consciousness

subject defined both through relationships and in language.

Finally, however, it is the body that communicates. Early in the story, during the bitterest times of argument between Eva and her husband, their hurtful words would be forgotten as they fell into the physical patterns of sleep: "After all the years, old harmonies and dependencies deep in their bodies; she curled to him, or he coiled to her, each warmed, warming, turning as the other turned, the nights a long embrace" (83-84). As Faulkner says of this scene, "Hands speak when voices cannot. . . . David's and Eva's bodies know something about the bonds between them that their words contradict. Despite their words to each other--David's sarcasm and Eva's bitter curses--their bodies speak an unbreakable oneness" (134). Years of marriage and the bonds of sex and family provide a means of physical communication, bridging pain when words cannot, that is called upon again as Eva approaches death. When her husband is afraid of the "sound [that] bubbled in her throat while the body fluttered in agony," he can hardly recognize the expressions of his wife: "He tried not to listen, as he tried not to look on the face in which only the forehead remained familiar" (117). During those hours when he sits with her, though his instinct is to walk away and avoid his grief, Eva's husband nevertheless "went back, checked her pulse, gently tended with his knotty fingers as Jeannie had taught" (122). Eva responds to his care: "She was whimpering; her hand crawled across

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evolve collectively, through the simultaneous processes of differentiation from and identification with her family and old radical Jewish friends" (3). While psychologists such as Freud or Nancy Chodorow "argue that selfhood is largely achieved by separation," Pfaelzer writes, "Olsen's notion of identity is closer to developmental theorist Jessica Benjamin's theory of 'intersubjectivity'--identity that evolves through reciprocity and rapprochement" (13). Finally, instead of the isolated and even misunderstood subjectivity some readings have given to Eva, Pfaelzer argues rather for an intersubjectivity, a defining of self through and from others, alternating between times of isolation and connectivity: "Rather than deconstructing the subject, therefore, Olsen offers a model of consciousness mediated through relationships with other subjects who are also positioned historically. It is an aesthetics that accounts for alienation and communication" (15).

the covers for his. . . . Words foamed, died unsounded. Her body writhed; she made kissing motions with her mouth" (122). The couple carries on a wordless conversation, expressing their love, sadness, and unity.[7]

For David, however, the subjectivity streaming from Eva at the end of her life is hurtful. Her words exclude the family years spent living with him and their children: "It seemed to him that for seventy years she had hidden a tape recorder, infinitely microscopic, within her, that it had coiled infinite mile on mile, trapping every song, every melody, every word read, heard, and spoken--and that maliciously she was playing back only what said nothing of him, of the children, of their intimate life together" (118). Faulkner interprets this seeming change in Eva's personality as evidence of how she has adapted coping skills over the years to mask and maintain her true identity:

> Denied a wider scope for her energy, she is a compulsive cleaner of her own house and those of her daughters-in-law; denied companionship all her life, she has become a solitary; denied words, she has become stubbornly silent. Yet Eva maintains an ironic distance from the roles that appear to have absorbed her life, never succumbing to them but rather seeing them for what they are: a diminution and distortion of her strength and intelligence. . . . Besides being a mother, she is also a thinker, a dreamer, a lover, a revolutionary set down in a particular time and place and shaped by a particular set of communal experiences. (85-86)

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[7] Faulkner sees Eva's abject body as the final communicator in the story. Language faces the limits of inexpressible selfhood that physical contact alone can transcend: "For Olsen, language must neither replace nor overwhelm physical means of communication; words alone cannot bridge the distance between people or bind them together, nor can they fully express or define an embodied life rooted in history and grounded in community" (137-38).

Eva retains all of those dimensions, then, during her years of being known only as a wife and mother. Yet, as Faulkner points out, "This nameless woman becomes Eva only at the end of the story. For the first fifty pages of the fifty-three-page novella, Eva does not have a name. To the children she is *Ma* or *Granny* or half of an indivisible unit referred to as *they*" (85). Her husband and family neither realize her identity nor acknowledge her separateness until Eva's physical deterioration shows that she is being literally taken away from them by death.

In "Tell Me a Riddle," the particular role of motherhood is presented in its potential for negative abjection. Olsen portrays the need for mothers to put children's development ahead of their own selfhood but also shows that mothers need family and community support to do this in a healthy way. When the weight of parenting is carried primarily by an isolated or impoverished mother, maternal abjection becomes harmful. Olsen's stories affirm Kristeva's point that the "loving mother, different from the caring and clinging mother, is someone who has an object of desire; beyond that, she has an Other with relation to whom the child will serve as go-between. . . [;] without the maternal 'diversion' toward a Third Party, the bodily exchange is abjection or devouring" (*Tales* 34).

Olsen presents her final treatment of this theme in a much lesser known story, "Requa I." Published in 1971 in *The Iowa Review*, it recounts the experience of Stevie, a thirteen-year-old whose mother has died and who must go live in Oregon with an uncle, Wes, whom he barely knows. Readers' first glimpse of Stevie shows him being transported to his new home in Wes' truck, hugging his knees in a fetal posture, "curling and curling till he got all in a ball under the mackinaw and didn't have to see or smell"

(238). The story thus quickly reveals itself as one tracing a process of rebirth of Stevie who has returned, in his grief, to an abject state.

In his new environment Stevie is barely functional. "All he wanted was to lie down . . . *forever*," the narrator says (239). Even when lying down, though, he cannot escape the weight of consciousness he longs to be rid of: "And the head on his pillow bulging, though still he is having to hold it up somewhere And the round and round slipping sliding jolting moved to inside him, so he has to begin to rock his body; rock the cot gently, down and back" (240). Again Stevie's body movement is reminiscent of how a mother would console an infant. Mourning for his mother, the only parent he has known, and left with a bachelor uncle who has never spent time with children, Stevie regresses to the state of an abject child without a parent to nurture him.

His first weeks spent in Oregon display Stevie's nearly inhuman psychological state. At the boarding house where he and his uncle live, the boy refrains from all communication: "At the table he looked at no one, answered in monosyllables, or seemed not to hear at all, stared at the wall or at his wrist, messed the food on his plate into the form of one letter or another, hardly ate. . . [;] he would walk somnambule back to the gaunt room, take off his shoes, get under the covers and lie there, one hand over his eyes" (242).

Troubled by his nephew's behavior but equally without a clue as to how to help him, Wes initially ignores Stevie's frequent tears and helpless demeanor, hoping they will simply go away. He knocks on the boy's bedroom door after work, trying to engage in conversation, but is met with Stevie's blank look of grief and entire absence of personality: "*(No smile. Skinny little shrimp. Clutching at the door knob, knuckles white,*

nostrils flaring. Funny animal noises in his throat.)" (239). His frustrated efforts to be a friend to Stevie eventually turn into anger. When another man startles the boy by speaking to him at dinner, Wes loses his patience: "Serves you right, sitting there night after night like you're no place at all, hardly answerin if people talk to you. . . . IS YOU DERE?" (245). Wes' severe question represents the psychological and existential dimension of Stevie's grief. Rendering the boy's unvoiced thoughts in italics, the narrator answers for Stevie, "*(Somewhere. But the stupor, the lostness, the torpor) (the safety) Keep away you rememorings slippings slidings having to hold up my head Keep away you trying to get me's Become the line on a plate, on a wall The rocking and the making warm the movement of leaves against sky I work so hard for this safety Let me a while Let me)*" (245). Abject grief is expressed here with abject text, delineated outside the boundaries of grammar. As if Stevie's "Let me . . ." remains an unfinished thought, Wes announces, "C'mon. Set up like you belong. We're going to get shed of that box" (245).

Wes is referring to a box of trinkets Stevie carried with him from home that he has not been willing to unpack. The collection of random objects that Wes dumps onto Stevie's bed is listed in a free-verse litany:

> Scooping onto the bed:
>
> boy-sitting-on-a-chamber-pot ash tray Happy Joss Hollywood California
>
> painted fringed pillow cover kewpie doll green glass vase, cracked
>
> Jesus, what junk
>
> tiny India brass slipper ash tray enamel cigarette case, Fujiyama scene
>
> (thrown too close to the edge of the bed, it slithers off, slips down behind)

pencils, rubber banded

Junk is right. We sure throwed it in in a hurry

Plush candy box: sewing stuff: patches buttons in jars stork scissors

pincushion doll, taffeta bell skirt glistening with glass pinheads (245)

These objects, like Stevie, are abject. Without reference or context, they bear no meaning to Wes and seem to hold no purpose for Stevie. The incompletion and lack of resolution displayed here are prefigured in Wes' question as they first move Stevie's things into his room: "Just a mitt? no ball, not bat? . . . Oddsies, endsies" (240). Just as a catcher's mitt is an in-between object in the relationship of bat to ball, the boy, neither subject nor object of anyone's love, himself exists in an abject state. Just as these miscellaneous items are not recognizable as belonging to anyone or as carrying any meaning, the boy feels himself to be equally unidentified, belong to no family--abject. His belongings are not even *personal* but, rather, are unlabeled, as detached as he is. Not surprisingly, Stevie reacts violently to the emptying of his box. He initially falls to the floor in a fit of anger and mute grief and then runs to the bathroom and vomits. Signs of physical abjection frequently accompany his emotional state. In stark awareness that he is a leftover, without family since his mother's death, Stevie experiences a sort of existential revulsion that Sartre describes: "My knowledge extends my nausea toward that which it is for others. For it is the Other who grasps my nausea, precisely as *flesh* and with the nauseous character of all flesh" (333).

After it becomes clear to Wes that Stevie refuses to go to school, he gets his nephew a job at a junkyard. There, sorting through other people's discarded items and garbage, Stevie can finally begin the process of sorting through his own grief. As

Faulkner points out, the sight of children juxtaposed with refuse heaps has been seen in Olsen's work before: "In both 'Requa' and *Yonnondio*, where children search the town dump for treasures, the characters themselves are junk, a wasteful society's throwaways whom Olsen salvages for her readers" (29). As Stevie works at the dump, once again the narrator lists abject items--random pieces and assorted parts of objects no longer bearing meaning or ownership: "Disorder twining with order. The discarded, the broken, the torn from the whole: weathereaten weatherbeaten: mouldering, or waiting for use-need. *Broken existences that yet continue*" (252). Clearly Stevie is also one of these broken existences.

Ironically, working amidst junk serves to piece Stevie together. As Blanche Gelfant explains, "At the junkyard Stevie slowly acquires skill and patience, which give him a sense of self-respect. He can put things together, including himself. As he sorts through heaps of waste, he finds a rhythm to his life: The incremental repetition of tasks produces a sense of pattern and continuity, of meaning. He is becoming someone who keeps working, making order, and making himself into an integrated person" (211-12). Furthermore, Gelfant argues, there is an important connection between the fragments of Stevie's belongings and the garbage he sorts through, and the textual format and style of the story itself:

> Merged together, the broken pieces of "Requa" create an integrated self as well as an aesthetic entity. The story enacts a process of composition to show broken existences continuing, order emerging from disorder, art from images of waste, and speech from the void of silence. . . . The story contains a secret that must be pieced together from disconnected

> fragments, inferred from blank spaces on the page, melded out of poetic prose and vomit, snot, and violence. This secret, that broken existences can continue, is stated explicitly. (213)

The abject is figured prominently here, both in the physical manifestations of extreme grief (vomit, snot), at the site of his job (a garbage dump), and in the linguistic texture of Olsen's descriptions. Just as Stevie's identity has fallen into fragments following the death of his mother, his story is rendered in incomplete, unpunctuated sentences, through seemingly random italics and parentheses, and along non-sequitur lines that often must be pieced together like a puzzle.

The affinity Stevie feels with the rotting landscape of the junkyard becomes evident as his demeanor progresses towards more normal, functioning behavior. The change is particularly noticeable when he becomes the one who must take care of his drunk uncle. As he covers Wes with a blanket, tucking in the edges, Stevie whispers "*There now you'll be warm . . . sleep sweet, sweet dreams* (though he did not know he had said it, nor in whose inflections)" (259). Implying that Stevie is now strong enough to nurture someone else by using the internalized voice of his mother, the narrator shows him regaining the selfhood he had lost, or, at least, taking on a selfhood he finds admirable. A self's ability to attend fully to the Other and care for his needs is also a sign of its individuation and maturity. In attending to his uncle, he illustrates Heidegger's point that a person is most fully himself in interaction with others: "[T]his I-here does not mean an eminent point of an I-thing, but as being-in is to be understood in terms of the over there of the world at hand where Da-sein dwells in *taking care*" (112). Similarly, Anton also explains,

> Clearly, selfhood is not simply a content, not merely a that-toward-which the lived-body concernfully comports itself. It is, more globally, the fact of concernful attending, the concernful orientation that is implicated in the lived-body's caring-over any object whatsoever, not simply the "body" per se. We are headless care-takers, entities who need not have faces for-ourselves, for we are mostly ourselves when we concernfully face others, events, and things. (149)

Stevie's growing emotional health is thus reflected in his ability to recognize a need besides that of expressing his own grief.

Additional progress in Stevie's recovery of subjectivity is revealed as lists of discarded items at the junkyard--"cutters benders grinders beaders shapers . . ." (260)--turn into lists of verbs describing work Stevie is actively doing--"sharping hauling sorting splicing burring chipping . . ." (261). The boy's changing attitude in the midst of his work is also revealed in quiet details, still fragmentary, showing an appreciation of things and new perception of beauty: "Orange rust flowerings flake, cling to the quivering stalks, embroider the gaping pan holes. Beauty of rot rust mold. Wingding anchors bearing sheaves plated, crackle, mottle blue, satin finish" (260). As scrap metal turns to art in Stevie's mind, perhaps his own abject self-image begins to shift from that of an orphaned self to one in the process of reconnecting with others.

The emotional climax within "Requa" occurs when Wes lights a huge pile of junk on fire and Stevie begins "spasms of laughing and spastic body dance as the flames spurt" (262). While Wes is confused, as usual, by his nephew's reactions, Stevie experiences an emotional breakthrough, an unexpected epiphany that allows his grief to

escape the boundaries of his selfhood and rise up with the garbage flames:

> The wordless ecstasy will not contain. Quiver and dazzle are magnified in the strange smoking air. Baking mud sucks at his shoes as he runs from flash to flash. Stench of burning rubber and smoldering wet rags layer in with the heady sweet spring vapors. How vast each breath. Wreathes of yellow and black smoke rise. A stately rain of ash begins. ***And still the rippling, glancing, magnifying light.*** It drives him down by the river, but the stench and dazzle are there too, and flashing rainbow crescents he does not know are salmon leaping. (262)

In his emotional identification with the violent decomposition of the fire, Stevie appears to reach a zero-point of abjection at which, in "wordless ecstasy," he is able himself to disintegrate completely and be born anew, phoenix-like, from the ashes. His laughter, occurring in spasms, rocks his body as spasms of grief had done previously. Again in this story Olsen finds hope and beauty among images of waste and destruction. As if Stevie's pain is seared into pieces and floating into the "rain of ash" around him, his vision is cleared, and he is able to see the world's colors again, perhaps for the first time since being in Oregon: "There, where the blue water greens the edging forest, the climbing fir trees blue the sky, on a sandy spit, he lays himself down" (262). Like a swimmer at rest at the end of the scene, Stevie seems to reach dry land after swimming through an ocean of grief for his lost mother.

Unlike other Olsen stories, this one holds out the hope of resurrection after great suffering and pain. This reversal is reflected in one of Olsen's own nearly contradictory statements. When she says in an interview "I am a destroyed person" and "I am a

survivor" (Lisa Orr 227), both comments can be true because, as her story shows, they are not mutually exclusive. As Gelfant argues, "Though 'Requa' describes the fragmentation of a life disrupted by death, it creates in the end a vision of relatedness that gives the displaced person somewhere to belong. . . . Olsen speaks of the power of mother love as a basis for the continuity of one's self and of one's relationships with others" (211). Thus, it is his mother's love and his memory of it that establish the core of Stevie's identity and give him the strength even after her death to find psychological integration. Gelfant also believes that "the story thus restates Olsen's recurrent riddle," which she describes as "the mystery of human survival as evidenced by people who continue to live and to care even though their lives seem broken and futile, and life itself full of pain" (209).

In "Requa," accepting and growing through states of abjection is key in enduring such pain. Stevie can echo Kristeva's words that "I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit" (*Powers* 3). While Stevie appears mute, severely depressed, and perhaps even suicidal early in the story, ultimately his transformation comes from his experience within psychological abjection and the literal abject environment of the junkyard.[8] Just as other Olsen stories reveal a mother's abjection as having both good and bad potential, the extremes of abject grief are here shown to be both devastating but potentially rejuvenating. Likewise, Elaine Orr writes that "The story's complex and consistent use of paradox--healing comes through brokenness, wholeness issues from fragmentation, love is achieved as the main character comes face to face with loss and

[8] Similarly, Pearlman and Werlock argue that "the reader senses that Stevie, like a wasted family, political system, or social structure, must collapse before he can be rebuilt in a better form" (115).

deprivation--is mirrored in the text itself" (121). Orr also argues that the story illustrates how healing personal brokenness can come through care for others: "The story portrays human caring as an act of beauty and as a fulfillment. Stevie's blossoming . . . is precisely his learning to reach out to those around him and to recognize human likenesses" (131). In fact, according to Orr, this pattern of pain that is recycled into growth and nurturance for others is an important truth expressed in all of Olsen's work:

> The mystery of Olsen's central paradox--the riddle of depletion and renewing life-- is another invitation to religious interpretation. Her hope for rebirth takes the unlikely form of a search among absences, silences, discontinuities, and brokenness. . . . Like the women of earlier generations who created quilts out of discarded clothes and other remnants, she brings a new comprehension of life and its possibilities out of histories and hopes that appear hopeless or beyond repair. (xvi, 35)

Clearly "Requa" is an example of this, of Olsen taking an emotionally and psychologically abject character and grounding his suffering in an enriching soil that produces growth.

But what of Olsen's other stories? What about the Holbrooks' poverty, Emily's deprived childhood, and Eva's isolation and death?[9] Although most of her work does not

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[9] While critical discussions focus on the obviously difficult circumstances faced by these characters, many also tend to agree in sensing hopefulness in Olsen's work. As Elaine Orr explains, "The artistry of the work resides in the text's visionary evocation of love, caring, and grace out of desperate and unfulfilled lives. Descending with the characters into the basest of life conditions--illness, poverty, and human-inflicted pain--readers are witnesses to the paradoxical beauty and strength of lives that refuse to be overcome" (52). And for Pearlman and Werlock, hope is presented in a character like Jeannie who, in "Tell Me a Riddle," "appears in the morning sunlight, a confident young woman who voluntarily participates in the paradoxical rituals of love and death. Individualistic but not narcissistic, she emerges as independent, educated, and self-assured, a young woman aligned with youth, art, and life, respectful of the

show the redemptive possibilities of abjection, I believe she uses the abject to foreground the effects family welfare and social class have upon children's and adult's psychological well-being. The implication is that just as neglect can produce damage, so can positive recognition produce growth. With the same capacity that selves carry to inflict deep harm upon other selves, deep nourishment can also be cultivated.

I agree with an argument Faulkner makes, describing what she calls the "blight-fruit-possibility paradigm" in these stories: it "is a pattern that emerges from Olsen's life and the lives of the despised people about whom she writes," comprised of "a precarious balancing of contradictions in which blighting circumstances always threaten to obliterate the memory of past achievements and destroy future possibility" (28). Faulkner elaborates on this point as follows:

> In Olsen's work, selfhood is never for the self alone, but always for the self and the community. Without community, each person is caught up in competition, hermetically sealed away from compassion, and denied the full range of human feeling and activity. . . . A rich definition emerges from Olsen's fiction: a community is any group that is not simply an aggregate of individuals but rather people who are bound together for support and protection or to achieve a common cause, and who feel themselves mutually responsible. (81-82)

Opposed to the independent and competitive sense of self promoted by capitalist materialism, Olsen shows the beauty of interdependence and mutuality that can emerge among people in impoverished circumstances. Forced out of isolation by their need to

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complexities of human life" (111).

help each other and not operating under the drive for selfish gain that may categorize middle or upper classes, the lower class may have an advantage, Olsen suggests, in its nearness to the raw edges of human life and its understanding of how selves, even as adults, stand in mutual need of one another for survival. Thus, the very forces that challenge the development of selfhood and create social abjection may also serve to strengthen communities that enrich the self.

Again, this view of the self is grounded in an object-relations, rather than strictly Freudian, conception of selfhood.[10] Catherine Clément describes this self-in-relation as follows:

> The wall that fortifies the Subject is its collective share, its psychic habitat, the stronghold of its membership in the social body. . . . It is nothing other than identity: it is I, standing, in a photograph, in a picture stuck on a card that has to be produced before the authorities; it is I, with my distinguishing marks . . . I, with my definitions: an unbearable collection of *belongings to*. (251)

While a society that judges selfhood on the basis of material well-being may, unfortunately, bestow less selfhood or agency upon people who have fewer objects *belonging to* them, the foundation of this concept has nothing to do with economics. It lies rather in an individual's sense of uniqueness, in the characteristics and relationships

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[10] In *The Bonds of Love*, Jessica Benjamin explains the difference between her feminist object-relations view and strict Freudian psychology: "The intersubjective view, as distinguished from the intropsychic, refers to what happens in the field of self and other. Whereas the intrapsychic perspective conceives of the person as a discrete unit with a complex internal structure, intersubjective theory describes capacities that emerge in the interaction between self and others. Thus intersubjective theory, even when describing the self alone, sees its aloneness as a particular point in the spectrum of relationships rather than as the original, 'natural state' of the individual" (20).

belonging to a person that uniquely makes her herself. While the lower class may be made to feel socially abject by a larger society refusing to recognize them, Olsen suggests that parents of all social levels still carry enormous power in their ability to recognize and affirm the selfhood of their children.

Olsen, then, is a writer of the abject--the emotionally, physically, and socially cast down from or out of human life. In her fiction, "abject poverty" takes on new meaning as the literal exclusion the poor experience in society mirrors their psychological struggle against becoming dehumanized, or de-selved, because of their being poor. The experience of abjection is more than part of an infant's process of individuation for these characters. It is a state of emptiness in which parents do not have the resources or time to surround their children with a protective bubble of safety, welfare, or the tangible expressions of their love.

Furthermore, these manifestations of abjection foreground a tension between oppressed and expressed selfhood that I believe is foundational to Olsen's fiction.[11] The debate between humanism and radical postmodernism about whether there *is* such a thing as the innate self is addressed in her work. Olsen's awareness of this debate is particularly noticeable in her comment about selfhood in *Silences*: "It is irrelevant to even talk of the core of self when circumstances do not sustain its expression or development, when life has tampered with it and harmed it" (Pearlman 32). Although her work was written prior to discussion of postmodernism and its sometimes assumed absence of

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[11] I agree with Deborah Rosenfelt as she points to the larger question of selfhood in a discussion of "silences in" versus "silences of" Olsen's work: "The field between these two interpretive zones is the location where humanism, a set of assumptions affirming a unified and innately creative self, encounters postmodernism's anti-humanist assumptions of a textuality shaped by history and ideology, virtually divorced from the intentional creativity of an individual authorial subject" (49).

selfhood, critics such as Pearlman and Werlock seem to have interpreted these words as Olsen's final ruling on the irrelevance of selfhood. In categorizing her work as proletarian literature, they seem to imply that attention to class concerns means that concern with individual psychology disappears. Others, however, believe Olsen shows that rebuilding selfhood is one of the most vital projects and prerequisites for rebuilding society. Lisa Orr, for example, writes that "While Olsen imagines children born with a self intact, their circumstances crush it out of them. No workers survive undamaged. At best they manage to retain something of their identity. . . . Worrying about having a self, she suggests, is a luxury. But it is also a form of resistance" (222). Like Orr, I believe that emphasis on individual selfhood is precisely part of Olsen's proletarian project. For Olsen, there is a clear distinction between the potential (innate) core of self as it *ought to be* if properly nurtured and the limited self damaged by restricting circumstances.

Olsen's fiction illustrates that boundaries between selves are porous and complicated. The *abject*, in her work, is portrayed as an uneasiness brought about by the sacrifices of parenthood, by the power of extreme grief, and by the approaching limit of death. She demonstrates her belief *both* in an innate selfhood, waiting to be developed, and in the need for a family and community to allow that self to grow in healthy freedom that will lead to its interdependence. Her stories recognize a self's social context as having the power to shape that self either toward strength and mutual caring or toward abject shame and isolation. Most importantly, Olsen uses abjection to illustrate the social and emotional wounds of material hardship and the damage these can inflict upon psychological health.

". . . a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself." Julia Kristeva

CHAPTER THREE

The Self Dethroned: The Function of Abjection in Nabokov

By mid-century, as experiments in novel technique moved in the direction of parody and metafiction, authors had new options for portraying the fissures within human subjectivity. Psychological abjection gained a potential parallel in the abject, fragmented text. Rejecting the boundaries of verisimilitude in which characters had acted within a unified, clearly fictional world, metafiction allowed the lines to blur between objective fiction and subjective reality. In a text that no longer had to behave like the realistic novel, first-person narrators could lead readers across their psychological landscape, however bizarre that terrain might be. As an "experimental" novelist Vladimir Nabokov used these techniques to the fullest. He repeatedly portrayed characters who enacted their own abjection in particularly unusual or pronouced ways.

The geographical displacements of Nabokov's life make him one of the most literally abject authors of the twentieth century. Resident of different continents, writer in two different languages (three, if his French story is counted), he is credited with literary masterpieces in both Russian and English. Bridging modernism and postmodernism, his writing exhibits traits of both movements and is filled with a cast of abject characters. Nearly every novel features a murder, a suicide, or someone mentally deranged. Many, in fact, feature all three. As Margaret Boegeman puts it, "Anyone who has read Nabokov even casually has noted his refusal to assign a socially redeeming

message to his fictions, which are usually peopled by an unregenerate assortment of perverts, loonies, murderers, and social misfits of many minor stripes" (113). Despite his jabs at critics who would play psychoanalyst to his creations, the similarities between Nabokovian characters' behavior and a glossary of psychiatric disorders is striking. From generalized anxiety to schizoid paranoia, the characters' various delusions add both humor and humanity to each text in addition to questioning the existence of *selfhood* itself. The frequency of self-other confusion in his work, then, makes Nabokov an important figure in a study of abjection in literature. While almost any of his novels could be used in a study of abjection, a sample of writing across his career, specifically of *The Defense*, *The Eye*, *Despair*, and *Pale Fire*, shows that Nabokov often created oddly abject characters whose blurred subjectivity tends to create confusion upon an initial reading of the text. Symptoms of Nabokovian abjection in his early fiction include the robotic dissociation between body and self, the out-of-body sensation in which a character observes himself from the outside, and the narcissistic perception that another person is one's double. Later novels, such as *Invitation to a Beheading* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, challenge the dividing lines between both self and body, and self and other. Finally, in *Pale Fire*, Nabokov's characters express varying degrees of abjection--narcissistic, suicidal, murderous--ultimately showing the extent to which every person must negotiate with the abject, as Kristeva argues.

I am certainly not the first to focus on the importance of selfhood in Nabokov's fiction. Julian Connolly's book *Nabokov's Early Fiction: Patterns of Self and Other* begins with the premise "that the complexity of Nabokov's work reflects its creator's unique response to the richness of human experience, from the rapturous potential of the

human imagination to the stark realities of alienation, loss, and suffering. At the core of this experience lies the crucial relationship between self and other" (1-2). Connolly also points out that "the images with which Nabokov characterizes the writer's relationship to his readers--the use of masks, mirrors, and multiplication of the self--all figure prominently in his fiction; such recurrence testifies to the centrality of the issue of self and other in his thoughts" (7). Thomas Frosch links Nabokovian parody with the issue of selfhood: "Parody is at once an impersonation and an affirmation of identity, both an identification with and a detachment from the other. . . . It may be true that some aggression is inherent in all parody, no matter how loving, but it is an aggression that is more primal than intellectual critique: it is the kind of aggression that says, 'This is me. This is mine'" (181). The use of humor itself is related to abjection. As Kristeva writes, "[L]aughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection" (*Powers* 8).

From an author who makes readers strikingly aware of his presence, however, readers are introduced to characters who often do not know *who* they are. Many of Nabokov's protagonists or narrators see the world from an infant's egocentric perspective. Some are fascinated with mirrors because they find interesting the stranger they see there. Some project their own thoughts onto strangers and seem to possess little understanding that other people are different or *other*. Many are not sure that their body belongs to them. In her study *Madness, Death and Disease in the Fiction of Vladimir Nabokov*, Nina Allan writes, "The main ingredient" missing in Nabokov's mad characters "is any real sense of objectivity, a capacity for abstract thought dissociated from themselves. Their sharpened consciousnesses therefore have nothing to work upon but the creation of a hermetically sealed universe with conditions perfectly tailored to suit its

occupant's specific illusions, delusions, and fantasies" (4-5).

This sense of "sharpened consciousnesses" is a frequent trait in Nabokov's heroes. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the narrator, V., says, "Most people live through the day with this or that part of their mind in a happy state of somnolence . . . but in my case all the shutters and lids and doors of the mind would be open at once at all times of the day. Most brains have their Sundays, mine was even refused a half-holiday" (65). Similarly, the narrator of *The Eye*, Smurov, explains his heightened consciousness:

> After all, in order to live happily, a man must know now and then a few moments of perfect blankness. Yet I was always exposed, always wide-eyed; even in sleep I did not cease to watch over myself, understanding nothing of my existence, growing crazy at the thought of not being able to stop being aware of myself, and envying all those simple people--clerks, revolutionaries, shopkeepers--who, with confidence and concentration, go about their little jobs. I had no shell of that kind. (17)

While this hyper-awareness is perhaps a sign of intelligence, of the rare genius with which Nabokov wanted to mark his peculiar characters, it is also a device he used to generate these characters' frequent and telling commentary on their psychological boundaries. To say these characters are lacking objectivity is obviously true. In calling them *abject*, however, the psychological threat to their very subjectivity is recognized. These characters are beside themselves to an alarming, albeit sometimes amusing, extent. Their lack of psychological coherence threatens to undo their subjectivity and, in Nabokov's more experimental fiction, threatens to undo the text as well. As Kristeva explains, "not until the advent of twentieth-century 'abject' literature . . . did one realize

that the narrative web is a thin film constantly threatened with bursting. For, when narrated identity is unbearable, when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain, the narrative is what is challenged first" (*Powers* 140-41). Particularly as a linguist, Kristeva understands that once subjectivity is held in question, so do language and the capacity for a self's enunciation in literature become similarly at risk.

One of Nabokov's most disturbingly abject figures appears in his third novel, *The Defense* (*Zashchita Luzhina*), first published in Russian in 1929. It is narrated in third-person and, unlike much of Nabokov's later work, tells its story in a straightforward, realistic manner. The story is of a chess prodigy, Aleksandr Luzhin, who becomes a Grandmaster but is unable to sustain normal human relationships. Despite the efforts of the woman who marries him to save him from his chess obsession, Luzhin experiences a "flattening" of self and begins to imagine that life is a chess game. Seeing himself as a gamepiece, trapped in a repeated sequence of moves, Luzhin finally decides to surprise his invisible opponent with a trick move--his suicide or "sui-mate," as Nabokov put it (Alexandrov 67). *The Defense* represents one of Nabokov's early experiments with selfhood. The text seems to ask: What if a person is no more than a chess piece? If someone ceases to experience himself psychologically, does he retain an awareness of his physical being? To frame these questions Nabokov creates a character who is strikingly abject.

Although chess-playing becomes the catalyst which reveals Luzhin's distorted selfhood, it is important to note that his "problems with others, both visible and invisible, began long before he discovered the game of chess" (Connolly 84). As a child Luzhin is

drawn to detective stories because he liked "that exact and relentlessly unfolding pattern" (*Defense* 34). He liked to daydream about geometric shapes, and "he lingered long in those heavens where earthly lines go out of their mind" (37). His child's mind was starkly impersonal, appreciating stories not for people but for pattern, his imagination devoted to theoretical axes of objectivity. As Richard Borden points out, "While Luzhin eventually becomes an extremely childish adult, as an actual child he is portrayed as monstrously unchildlike. He is described as 'stiffish,' 'sluggish,' and 'impenetrably sullen'" (116).[1] His lack of movement and animation foreshadows the nearly inanimate state he will come to occupy.

Details about Luzhin's relationship with his parents also indicate a lack of human warmth and bonding. The description of the "novella" his father plans to write indicates that the book is obviously about himself and his son, with one important difference: it would be "about precisely such a chess-playing small boy, who was taken from city to city by his father (foster father in the novella)" (75). Imaginatively displacing himself from real parent to "foster father," Luzhin Sr. reveals his felt distance from his son. Similarly, Luzhin's mother "had begun to experience a strange feeling of estrangement from her son, as if he had drifted away somewhere, and the one she loved was not this grown-up boy, not the chess prodigy that the newspapers were writing about, but that little warm, insupportable child who at the slightest provocation would throw himself flat

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[1] In "The Relentless Combination: Chess and the Patterns of Madness in Vladimir Nabokov's *The Defense*," Glen Downey gives a similar analysis of Luzhin's social disorder:

> The fatal pattern that drives Luzhin to suicide is also in part a product of his inability to achieve real intimacy with others, and indeed even in childhood, he only manages relationships by reducing them to a series of precise rituals. . . . With unerring geometrical accuracy, Luzhin avoids any chance of prolonged social intimacy. . . [;] he

on the floor, screaming and drumming his feet" (73-74). Though his mother here recalls her past love for Luzhin, it seems significant that she remembers not a child she was happily close to but a tantrum-throwing one who was "insupportable," as if that were her best memory. In Vladimir Alexandrov's analysis, "Luzhin emerges from the first pages of *The Defense* not only as a little boy with a difficult personality, but as a human vessel waiting to be filled with some as yet unspecified content" (63). A self with scarce relationship to ***himself***, he seems to be severely lacking in subjectivity.

As Luzhin enters the world of chess competitions, his abject selfhood intensifies. His coach, Valentinov, handles him more like a robot than a person. Allan describes Luzhin's situation well: "Valentinov treats him like some variety of pedigree animal, even going so far as to supervise his diet and outlaw sexual relationships. . . . Luzhin the Grandmaster is wheeled from tournament to tournament in the manner of a cardboard silhouette, or a gamesplaying computer" (47). As his chess success continues, his own lack of personhood becomes more emphasized. The narrator frequently interprets Luzhin's behavior by statements like "Only rarely did he notice his own existence" (95). Luzhin does not even realize when he is smoking until "the cigarette that seemed to have been thrust unnoticed into his mouth by someone else suddenly grew and asserted itself, solid, soulless, and static, and his whole life became concentrated in the single desire to smoke" (95). Being thus divided in his awareness of his physical self leads him to a psychological split. The sensation that there are two Luzhins is one he becomes acutely aware of during times of intense competition: "[T]he Luzhin who was wearily scattered

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> will ultimately be more comfortable with the symbolic representations of human beings on the chessboard than with human beings themselves. (149-50)

around the room slumbered, but the Luzhin who visualized a chessboard stayed awake and was unable to merge with his happy double. But still worse--after each session of the tournament it was with ever greater difficulty that he crawled out of the world of chess concepts, so that an unpleasant split began to appear even in daytime" (126).

This splitting fits with what object-relations psychologists would describe as an individual's failure to incorporate both good and bad aspects of the loved M/Other or, essentially, of himself, into his own self-concept. As Jessica Benjamin explains, "In the inner world, the subject incorporates and expels, identifies with and repudiates the other, not as a real being, but as a mental object" (21). Although his everyday self is referred to here as his "happy double," Luzhin comes to identify his chess-playing self--purely mental--as ideal, and his everyday self--purely physical--as a site of frustration. In the role of chess prodigy he receives more recognition and identification than he does as the son of preoccupied parents.

In fact, Luzhin comes to prefer the world of chess and the sense of ecstatic departure from his usual self that it brings him. He was happy in the abstract realm because *his* will was the only one in a world of shapes. He was king: "Real life, chess life, was orderly, clear-cut, and rich in adventure, and Luzhin noted with pride how easy it was for him to reign in this life, and the way everything obeyed his will and bowed to his schemes" (134). The child who had thrown a fit "at the slightest provocation" (74) found nothing to object to in a world of objects. He had no need to assert subjectivity when he was subject to no one and could instead be the master of movement, directing all the pieces across the organized grid of squares, dominating an opponent who could not operate in the abstract world as well as he. Luzhin's living mostly in chessland and

demonstrating inhuman-like behavior further forced those around him to treat him with care. After his breakdown during a match, "people and things around him tried to adorn the emptiness of Luzhin's life. He allowed himself to be lulled, spoiled and titillated, and with his soul rolled up in a ball he accepted the caressive life that enveloped him from all sides" (176). His state of continued absent subjectivity allows Luzhin to be treated like an infant. His wife and her family care for him as an irresponsible dependent in need of attention, one who is not capable of giving anything in return. Far from interacting with other people in normal or healthy ways, Luzhin hovers in the solipsism of the chess world where he no longer has to encounter others and always reigns as king but remains a target.

As Luzhin becomes unable to separate his existence from the rules of chess, he is pulled more firmly in the direction of object rather than subject: "His legs from hips to heels were tightly filled with lead, the way the base of a chessman is weighted. . . [;] it was as if he were becoming flatter and flatter, and then he soundlessly dissipated" (143). His physical awareness of himself eventually disappears completely, and he seems to enter the world of geometric daydreams that had absorbed him in childhood. Just prior to his suicide Luzhin is described as "sitting like a statue that had been carefully leaned against something" (245). When he is then getting ready to jump out of a window, "one leg hung outside, and he did not know where the other one was" (255). In the end he is trying to figure out how to remove his body from the "game" of life. Luzhin becomes Nabokov's experiment in fitting a three-dimensional person into a two-dimensional world. What remains unclear, however, is what level of subjectivity Nabokov gives this character. Does he suffer a mental illness, viewing himself as the "illusion" to which his

name sounds similar? Or does he willfully refuse the terms of subjectivity? From an existential perspective, being a person on some level involves a choice, as John Crosby explains: "In this accepting I take possession of myself, I make myself my own, and come to belong to myself in a new way, whereas in refusing to be the self that I am, I become estranged from myself, an object for myself, divided against myself; I *disown* myself, thus setting myself against my belonging to myself, impotently trying to undo it" (94). Luzhin fully meets this definition of the "estranged" self.

In Nabokov's next short novel, *The Eye* (*Soglyadatay*, 1930), he intensifies the strangeness of the abject protagonist by making him the first-person narrator of the story. What makes the novel even more unusual, however, is that for much of it this narrator, Smurov, refers to himself in third-person. Nabokov gives readers a hint in the foreword to the English edition: "A serious psychologist . . . may distinguish through my rain-sparkling crystograms a world of soul dissolution where poor Smurov only exists insofar as he is reflected in other brains, which in their turn are placed in the same strange, specular predicament as his" (iii). A walking case study of that which is neither subject nor object, detached from ties with others and from any sense of subjectivity, Smurov is, if such can exist, an abject hero. As Borden points out, "Smurov, the shadowy title character of *The Eye* is one of the few major personae in Nabokov's novels given no childhood at all--a fitting background for one so bereft of a fixed, intrinsic identity" (115). Smurov is similar to Kristeva's description of the erring narcissist: "he who loves a reflection without knowing that it is his own does not, in fact, know who he is" (*Tales* 107). However, "loves" is too kind a verb for his self-conception.

Early in the story, after receiving a beating from the husband of the woman with

whom he has been having an affair, Smurov plans his suicide. Prior to his attempt, trying to think of whom he could write suicide letters to, he says, "A wretched, shivering, vulgar little man in a bowler hat stood in the center of the room, for some reason rubbing his hands. That is the glimpse I caught of myself in the mirror. . . . It turned out, however, that I had no one to write to. I knew few people and loved no one" (27). Seeming to despise his reflected image, Smurov enacts his self-loathing and shoots himself. The suicide is unsuccessful, however, and he wakes in the hospital. As his narrative continues, readers realize that he believes himself to be dead. Already distanced from others psychologically, he now takes on a strange distance and division from himself: "I saw myself from the outside, treading water as it were, and was both touched and frightened like an inexperienced ghost watching the existence of a person whose inner lining, inner night, mouth, and taste-in-the-mouth, he knew as well as that person's shape" (33). In splitting from his own experience of self-consciousness, Smurov achieves what Foucault calls "the phase of abasement": "[P]resumptuously identified with the object of his delirium, the madman recognizes himself as in a mirror in this madness whose absurd pretensions he has denounced; his solid sovereignty as a subject dissolves in this object he has demystified by accepting it. He is now pitilessly observed by himself" (264). This sense of "sovereignty" reflects the healthy subject's sense of royal power, of having his identity *subject to* his own perception and choice. Smurov, like many of Nabokov's characters, abdicates this throne of selfhood.

Smurov's experience also fits R. D. Laing's description of the "false-self" pattern that some schizoid people adopt:

> [The] individual may prefer to pay the price of incurring the haunting

> sense of futility which is the necessary accompaniment of not being oneself, rather than hazard the frank experience of frightened helplessness and bewilderment which would be the inevitable start to being oneself. . . [;] it is as though they have turned their lives over to a robot which has made itself (apparently) indispensable. (*Divided* 111)

Such an extreme split between mind and body echoes what Kristeva describes as the profound experience of the physically abject: "It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's 'own and clean self' but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents" (*Powers* 53). Although she is here referring to the self's relationship to "urine, blood, sperm, excrement," Kristeva's analysis describes Smurov's loathing and disowning of himself equally well.

A stranger in his own skin, Smurov spends the rest of the novel collecting data about himself from other people. The technique allows Nabokov freedom to experiment with the very essence of selfhood. What *if* a person did not know, or remember, who he or she was? The case seems similar to that suffered by amnesia patients, except in this case others do not know Smurov is suffering any difficulty, and Smurov does remember everyone and everything else about his life. It is his *self* he has forgotten.[2]

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[2] Connolly believes Smurov's attitude shifts towards the end of the novel:

> Previously the narrator had claimed that he was the creator of the world in which he appeared to live, and that everyone else, including Smurov, was merely an illusion created by him. Now, however, he takes the opposite tack. He claims that it is he alone who does *not* exist, and that what truly exist are only the multiple images of Smurov. He suggests that his 'existence' consists only of external masks and that there is no authentic, immanent core to his being. (106)

Allan, on the other hand, believes that Smurov actually has a grandiose perception of himself which is humorously revealed to be false as he realizes what others think of him: "As we are made party to this painstaking search for facts, we see on the one hand Smurov's own overblown, tragically comic perception of himself, and on the other the demolition of this lordly vision as we view the reflection of Smurov in the eyes of others" (50-51).

Smurov enjoys his research: "In respect to myself I was now an onlooker. My belief in the phantomatic nature of my existence entitled me to certain amusements" (37). And he conducts it with a detached, scientific spirit of investigation: "I could already count three versions of Smurov, while the original remained unknown. This occurs in scientific classification" (63). With amused detachment, using an archaeological approach, he discusses his methodology with readers:

> I resolved to dig up the true Smurov, being already aware that his image was influenced by the climatic conditions prevailing in various souls--that within a cold soul he assumed one aspect but in a glowing one had a different coloration. I was beginning to enjoy this game. Personally, I viewed Smurov without emotion. A certain bias in his favor that had existed at the outset, had given way to simple curiosity. . . . I regarded Smurov, without any aesthetic tremor; instead, I found a keen thrill in the classification of Smurovian masks that I had so casually undertaken. (64)

Thus Smurov believes his self to be like a chameleon, changing colors or characteristics according to with whom his interaction takes place.[3] Is the message here that all people are Smurov-like, carrying flexible selves, or multiple masks, that they wear to fit a given situation? Or is Smurov, as an abject character, a deranged example of what the self

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[3] Here Smurov seems to embody Enrico Garzilli's idea of the self as a circle: "Contemporary man has gone beyond limiting the experience of the real to the problem of the individual, since he now sees within him many selves, some, he believes, more real than others. From another point of view he now asks which self is the real 'I'" (7). Furthermore, Garzilli explains,

> This circle is himself; it finds its many surfaces in consciousness, in other people, in his language, his personae, and his dreams. Enclosed in two interlocking circles, a symbol for the labyrinth as well as for infinity, man learns that his real self is not simply discovered but created. He remains forever in the act of creating himself, in dialogue with others, moving on from stage to stage of self. (8)

should never become? In view of Nabokov's style and commentary on his work, it is unlikely that discrete answers to these questions could or are meant to be found.

In ceasing altogether to have a relationship with himself, viewing himself with such an objective lack of emotion, Smurov also cuts off his potential to become an *Other* for other selves. Kristeva would describe this stance as a sort of perversion, one that "proposes its screen of *abject*, fragile films, neither subjects nor objects, where what is signified is fear, the horror of being *one* for an *other*" (*Tales* 340). Perhaps his psychological divorce from himself is the compromise of a person who intended to commit suicide and who has been forced to re-establish a relationship with his own unwanted self-consciousness.

Smurov eventually settles into himself again, saying, "I grew heavy, surrendered again to the gnawing of gravity, donned anew my former flesh, as if indeed all this life around me was not the play of my imagination, but was real, and I was part of it, body and soul" (79). In an adult's reenactment of the mirror phase, his subjectivity suddenly returns when he identifies himself as "me": "As I pushed the door, I noticed the reflection in the side mirror: a young man in a derby carrying a bouquet, hurried toward me. That reflection and I merged into one. I walked out into the street" (107). The power of this moment is captured in Borch-Jacobsen's description of a subject's self-recognition in a mirror:

> Lacan describes the mirror as both the source of all the subject's afflictions and the mainspring of his cure. On the one hand, the mirror captures, freezes, and alienates the subject by expatriating him in an image that dominates, subjugates, and "suggests" him. On the other hand, and

> simultaneously, it permits him to see himself--that is, to separate himself from his image by seeing himself in front of himself. (81-82)

In *The Eye* the mirror thus appears to "cure" Smurov of his malady. The novel ends with a narrator who knows who he is, once again using the word "I." Towards the end, he even seems psychologically reinforced by feeling love for Vanya even though she does not love him in return. Engagement with an Other thus further enables Smurov to reengage with self and arise out of abjection.

Nabokov's 1936 novel *Despair* (*Otchayaniye*) introduces a character whose struggles with abjection perhaps surpass even those of Smurov. While Smurov sought his reflection only from people who already knew him, *Despair*'s abject hero, Hermann, decides that an absolute stranger is his exact double and then concocts a plan to kill this man in order to escape with his own life insurance money. Not only is he certain that this other man, ironically named Felix, is his mirror image, but in determining to kill this supposed double, he is, in effect, seeking to destroy himself. Again, one of Foucault's descriptions of madness is relevant: "drawn to the surface of himself by a social personality silently imposed by observation, by form and mask, the madman is obliged to objectify himself in the eyes of reason as the perfect stranger, that is, as the man whose strangeness does not reveal itself. The city of reason welcomes him only with this qualification and at the price of this surrender to anonymity" (249-50). Outwardly behaving within the bounds of "normal," Hermann hides his delusional life even from his own wife and performs his daily routine specifically in order to conceal his strange plot.

Like any good Nabokovian murderer, Hermann is humorous. Foreshadowing the off-the-wall narrator readers will meet in *Pale Fire*, Hermann has an exaggerated view of

himself and frequently brags in the course his narration. According to himself, he is very intelligent: "I have thoroughly tested the remarkable qualities of clarity and cohesion exhibited by the logical masonry in which my strongly developed, but perfectly normal mind indulged" (8). He is well read: "And speaking of literature, there is not a thing about it that I do not know. It has always been quite a hobby of mine" (45). He has a fine wit: "As a rule I have always been noted for my exceptional humorousness; it goes naturally with a fine imagination; woe to the fancy which is not accompanied by wit" (60-61). And he has fine penmanship, which readers of these typed words would never have known:

> I have exactly twenty-five kinds of handwritings, the best . . . being as follows: a round diminutive one with a pleasant plumpness about its curves, so that every word looks like a newly baked fancy-cake; then a fast cursive, sharp and nasty, the scribble of a hunchback in a hurry, with no dearth of abbreviations; then a suicide's hand, every letter a noose, every comma a trigger; then the one I prize most: big, legible, firm and absolutely impersonal. (80)

Aside from revealing him to be a man with delusions of grandeur, Hermann's humorous comments also reveal his insecurity. Furthermore, his multiple handwritings suggest complications in his sense of identity; some metaphors used to describe them--suicide, noose, trigger--hint strongly at his instability. His favorite penmanship, the most impersonal one, shows his own preference for being no one in particular or anyone at all. The cumulative result of such bragging is that readers must put into doubt nearly everything that Hermann says. As Victoria Arana writes, "The text Hermann generates is

a tissue of broken attempts at self-objectification. Eventually, the 'line down the middle' . . . appears again and again before the mind of the reader, for it is the *reader* of Hermann's text who feels he must distinguish 'Hermann-as-agent' from 'Hermann-as-reflection,' Hermann as self-characterizer from Hermann as self-revealer" (127). His uncertain state of subjectivity also renders him, as a character subject to Nabokov's text, much more difficult to read.

Like Luzhin, Hermann frequently feels detached from his body and sometimes experiences a splitting into selves. For example, early in the story he refers to his body as only an "envelope": "I have grown much too used to an outside view of myself, to being both painter and model . . . Try as I may I do not succeed in getting back into my original envelope, let alone making myself comfortable in my old self; the disorder there is far too great" (19). Of time at home spent with his wife, Lydia, he explains, "The sensation of being in two places at once gave me an extraordinary kick" (27). Hermann then describes an instance of splitting in which he is watching himself in bed with her: "Eventually I found myself sitting in the parlor--while making love in the bedroom. It was not enough. I longed to discover some means to remove myself at least a hundred yards from the lighted stage where I performed" (28). However, he soon reverses the description and finds, perhaps to his surprise, that it is the *real* him that is observing and only his imagined self that is actually in contact with his wife. In scenes like these Hermann reveals his preference for grandiose imagined actions, actions reinforcing his extraordinary imagined selfhood, over real relationship. He fits Kristeva's description of "the archaic, narcissistic self, not yet demarcated by the outside world, [which] projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself, making of it an alien

double, uncanny and demoniacal. In this instance the strange appears as a defense put up by a distraught self" (*Strangers* 183). Like the abject, the uncanny double--a description of Freud's *unheimlich*--carries with it the frightening and tempting power of the repressed and accurately predicts Hermann's murderous reaction to his own perceived double.

Hermann shares other striking similarities to Smurov. He too has a strained relationship with mirrors and is quite uncomfortable with his reflection. Of the word "mirror" he says, "Now that is a word I loathe, the ghastly thing! I have had none of the article ever since I stopped shaving. . . [;] a crooked mirror strips its man or starts to squash him, and lo! there is produced a man-bull, a man-toad, under the pressure of countless glass atmospheres; or else, one is pulled out like dough and then torn into two" (21). After he meets Felix and convinces himself that this hapless bystander *is* him, Hermann experiences further disconnection from his own body and cannot identify his own mustache: "Above my bloodless mouth there bristled a brownish-red blotch with an obscene little notch in the middle. I had the sensation that it was glued on; and sometimes it seemed to me that a small prickly animal was settled on my upper lip. At night, half asleep, I would suddenly pluck at my face, and my fingers did not recognize it" (64). Hermann also sometimes has the feeling that he is not present unless others are giving him their full attention. When playing cards with Lydia and her not-so-secret lover, Ardalion, he says, "So they went on for a good while, talking now of their cards and now about me, as though I were not in the room or as though I were a shadow, a ghost, a dumb creature . . . [,] as if indeed it were merely my reflection that was present, my real body being far away" (65). Neither object of his wife's love nor subject secure in his own identity, Hermann remains out of touch with his own sense of betrayal, jealousy,

and anger over his wife's affair. Even his murder of Felix reveals a lack of human passion (not to mention compassion) and unfolds more like a carefully arranged chess match than a crime.

The final humor of *Despair* comes from Hermann's oddly revealing comments about his killing of Felix. While hiding out in a high altitude "hamlet" where he is supposedly writing his tale, he discovers a newspaper article describing the murder he has committed: "And I was unspeakably shocked by the tone of the thing: it was in fact so improper, so impossible in regard to me, that for a moment I even thought it might refer to a person bearing the same name as I; for such a tone is used when writing of some half-wit hacking to bits a whole family" (185). More humor comes when it is finally revealed how dissimilar Hermann and Felix actually appear. Although when he first writes of Felix he emphasizes their similarity so strongly--"Our resemblance struck me as a freak bordering on the miraculous. . . . He appeared to my eyes as my double, that is, as a creature bodily identical with me. It was this absolute sameness which gave me so piercing a thrill" (13)--readers finally are given proof of how delusional the entire premise of Hermann's plan was to begin with: "The police gave a brilliant example of logic when they expressed their surprise at my having hoped to deceive the world simply by dressing up in my clothes an individual who was not in the least like me. The imbecility and blatant unfairness of such reasoning are highly comic" (191). Reminiscent of Poe's well-spoken, bizarrely self-righteous criminal narrators, Hermann ends the book thinking himself a famous French performer, about to enact coming out of hiding, thanking his audience, and ready to take a bow.

Hermann notably shares, then, many of Luzhin and Smurov's abject

psychological traits: extreme self-consciousness, psychological distance from one's felt experience in the body, and the impulse of suicide. As Connolly points out, the similarities between *The Eye* and *Despair* are particularly significant. Both novels

> depict characters who are eager to register the opinions others have of them but who fear those very opinions. Anxiety-stricken, these protagonists search for creative responses to their vulnerability to the other. . . . Worried about the image they present to the outside world, they try to forestall any negative evaluation by others by defining themselves first. Treating their own self as an other, they attempt to manipulate the image they show to the world. (3)

Even more important than his displaying this instability and insecurity of selfhood, however, Hermann enacts his own complex ritual of abjection in actually killing the man he believes to be his exact "double." According to Dolores Burdick, "Hermann seeks his 'bad brother' (his bad self) in order to destroy him and thus find (or free) his own good self. A scapegoat will pay for his own guilt, real or imagined; exile and fragmentation have grown intolerable" (145).[4] I agree with Burdick's interpretation, particularly in the division between Hermann's "good" and "bad" self which seems to describe the splitting

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[4] Others have recognized this aspect of Hermann's crime as well. Connolly writes, "By endowing his intended victim with the identity of cuckolded husband, Hermann can perhaps purge himself of that attribute as well. His murder of Felix, then, has the air of a ritual purification" (150). And Wladimir Troubetskoy explains,

> By choosing Felix as his double and by killing him after he has disguised Felix as Hermann Karlovich, the latter tries to kill his own hated self, in order to *become* Felix: what interested and moved Hermann Karlovich, behind the seeming and superficial resemblance, was not, in fact, that resemblance, but the *difference* between him and Felix, for he wanted to become different from himself by becoming Felix, in order to be at last *happy*, but the difference of Felix is his inner truth which cannot be shared, for the double does not exist, there cannot be two Felixes, otherwise each would lack what makes Felix

I have traced in these other Nabokov characters.

In believing that he is this stranger, Hermann obviously does not know himself. Nabokov seems to be playing with phenomenological truths of selfhood in exaggerated ways. Hermann's situation, for instance, partially reflects what Berger and Luckmann describe as a natural reality of human selfhood--the obvious viewability of the other and the relative invisibility of the self: "[T]he other in the face-to-face situation is more real to me than I myself. . . . 'What he is,' therefore, is ongoingly available to me. This availability is continuous and prereflective. On the other hand, 'What I am' is *not* so available" (29). Similarly, Sartre links a self's being to the body of an other: "Due to the fact that I must necessarily be an object for myself only over there in the Other, I must obtain from the Other the recognition of my being" (213); and further, Sartre says, "I attempt to lay hold of the Other so that he may release to me the secret of my being. Thus vanity impels me to get hold of the Other and to constitute him as an object in order to burrow into the heart of this object to discover there my own object-state" (267). In wanting to "lay hold" of this stranger, Hermann desperately seeks to make himself visible and see himself come into being. In wanting to murder him, perhaps Hermann also feels that he could more fully be himself if this other, this usurper, is no longer able to *be* him.

This dynamic seems not only to fit the title of Kristeva's book *Strangers to Ourselves* but also the following description from it: "While the feeling of the uncanny that I experience when facing the other kills me by inches, on the other hand the anesthetized indifference of the stranger explodes in the murder of an other" (26). If

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> real, the fact that he is unique . . . . Hermann Karlovich fails, of course, in his endeavour, for one cannot reject and abandon oneself, one's old skin, like a snake. (58-59)

Hermann had decided to kill a stand-in for himself whom he actually knew, that person would encounter him with a look of recognition that would, in some sense, affix Hermann's subjectivity to himself. A stranger, on the other hand, offers him no such identification. Unable to enact his abject drama with someone who knows him, Hermann needs an absolute stranger to serve as the sacrifice for his inverted suicide.

Why does Hermann not simply kill himself? Nabokov does not seem to grant him enough subjectivity to actually carry out such a decisive act. Rather than boldly ending his own life, Hermann, at least subconsciously, seems to hope that it might be possible to simply trade lives with this stranger, ending his "own" life after it has been transferred to someone else. R. D. Laing's discussion of the schizoid patient in *The Divided Self* applies in many ways to Hermann's psychological condition and behavior. Like a schizophrenic person who feels that "there is nothing to want, nothing to envy, [and] there may be nothing to love . . . [,] in the last resort he sets about murdering his 'self,' and this is not as easy as cutting one's throat. He descends into a vortex of non-being in order to avoid being, but also to preserve being from himself" (99). Rather than attempting suicide as Smurov does, Hermann enacts his suicidal desire on Felix.[5] This distancing from oneself and self-objectification is what can then constitute the bridge between a suicidal impulse with that of the impulse to murder. In claiming to see this uncanny resemblance in an absolute stranger, Hermann unwittingly reveals his unsettled

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[5] This process again recalls a situation that Laing describes: "This identification of the self with the phantasy of the person by whom one is seen may contribute decisively to the characteristics of the observing self. . . . The individual has now a persecuting observer in the very core of his being" (*Divided* 126). The schizoid "retains his awareness of himself as an object in the eyes of another by observing himself as the other: he lends the other his eyes in order that he may continue to be seen, he then becomes an object in his own eyes. But the part of himself who looks into him and sees him, has developed the persecutory features he has come to feel the real person outside him to have" (126).

position as subject within his own skin. If suicide is taken as an obvious act of abjection, then Hermann's strange scheme in *Despair* reveals him to be twice or thrice abject--hating himself, not recognizing himself, and projecting his deranged sense of self onto another body.

In subsequent novels, Nabokov foregrounds abjection to such a literal extent that the entire notion of *selfhood* is put into question. In *Invitation to a Beheading* (*Priglasheniye na kazn*, 1935), for example, the hero Cincinnatus has been sentenced to prison for the metaphysical crime of "gnostical turpitude" (72). Others in his world are unstable, shifting identities as if they were merely portraying roles in a play. Similarly, the prison cell often fails to conform to rules of gravity and architecture. In such a flimsy, stage-play world, "Cincinnatus would take hold of himself, and, clutching his own self to his breast, would remove that self to a safe place" (24). In more than one scene he is described as literally dismembering his body, piece by piece. Yet, these moments emphasize all the more that the *real* Cincinnatus goes on, despite the condition of the bodily self he happens to inhabit. At one point he writes in his diary, "As far back as I can remember myself--and I remember myself with lawless lucidity, I have been my own accomplice, who knows too much, and therefore is dangerous . . . [;] to this day I occasionally feel . . . the primordial palpitation of mine, that first branding contact, the mainspring of my 'I'" (90). Cincinnatus' crime comes to be represented as knowledge of his three-dimensional soul in a world of people playing roles of mere pretended, two-dimensional selfhood.

The splitting of self and obvious psychological abjection featured in both *The Eye* and *Despair* again figures prominently in *Invitation to a Beheading*. Informed that his

wife's visit has been postponed, one Cincinnatus listens to the news calmly, while "(The other Cincinnatus . . . a little smaller, was crying, all curled up in a ball)" (69). Towards the novel's end, seeking to escape, "Cincinnatus got up, made a running start and smashed headlong into the wall--the real Cincinnatus, however, remained sitting at the table, staring at the wall, chewing his pencil" (193). One way of reading the story is as a resolution of the schizoid condition Laing describes: "Hence what was designed in the first instance as a guard or barrier to prevent disruptive impingement on the self, can become the walls of a prison from which the self cannot escape" (*Divided* 148). Watching the execution scenery collapse around him at the novel's end, Cincinnatus could be seen as finally escaping the "prison" of a schizophrenic self-objectification and splitting.

While the novel has been interpreted in numerous useful ways--as a surrealist excursion revealing one man's strength of individuality, as the allegory of a child's growing into legitimate selfhood[6]--I find *Invitation* significant for the way Cincinnatus'

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[6] In "Nabokov's Gnostic Turpitude: The Surrealistic Vision of Reality in *Priglasenie Na Kasn*," Ludmila Foster explains the growing presence of theatrical symbols in the novel: "Wigs, false beards, make-up paint, costumes, even dog masks are worn by almost everyone in the prison fortress. The theater metaphor grows more intensive towards the end of the book; the cell, the fortress, and even the sun are described as decorations" (121). She then emphasizes how Cincinnatus stands out in being different, being criminally real, in a world of actors:

> Cincinnat[us] is not subject to these transformations--a fact which stresses his uniqueness and his individuality. Instead, he splits in two several times, each time one of him is doing the required while the other simultaneously does the desired thing. . . . His taking himself apart and then growing back together is evidence of his inability to change himself. He is, instead, symbolically revealing his inner solidity, his criminal opacity in the world of transparency around him. (126)

In "*Invitation to a Beheading*: Nabokov's Absurdist Initiation," on the other hand, Dick Penner interprets the novel differently, from the "perspective in which Cincinnatus is the neophyte, the uninitiated man-child who does not 'know,' who has not come to grips with the terms of existence--life, time, and death" and who is described by a narrator who has a "parental attitude" (29). For him, the drama is one of Cincinnatus' existential growing-up: "Having passed through the trials of the initiation, he attains selfhood, and the props of the ritual, no longer needed, collapse and disintegrate at the command of the Master of Ceremonies, author Nabokov. Cincinnatus' reward, expressed in the final sentence of the novel, is to be

experience emphasizes the disposability, the literal abjectness, of the physical self. The body's implied distance and difference here from the center of the *real* self, perhaps better termed the "soul," seems to suggest perhaps a necessary common denominator of abjection shared by any person who inhabits a body at all. Again Nabokov is pulling apart mind from body and imagining one entity's possible experience apart from the other. The questions remains, however, why Cincinnatus is the only character who seems in touch with this anchor of *true* selfhood. Do not all people have the fixed center of a soul? Or is living without awareness of your soul the equivalent of not bearing a legitimate self?

For Kierkegaard, the answer to the latter is yes. While he grants that "every human being is a bit of a subject, in a sense" (*Kierkegaard's* 116), in his view, not all attain *subjectivity*. Using this term to represent the idea of an eternal soul, he writes, "The task of becoming subjective, then, may be presumed to be the highest task, and one that is proposed to every human being; just as, correspondingly, the highest reward, an eternal happiness, exists only for those who are subjective" (146). Even if one achieves subjectivity, Kierkegaard believes, maintaining that awareness of transcendence is immensely difficult: "But really to exist, so as to interpenetrate one's existence with consciousness, at one and the same time eternal and as if far removed from existence, and yet also present in existence and in the process of becoming: that is truly difficult" (273).[7]

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accepted into the fraternal community of those who have attained selfhood" (38).

[7] Although living with transcendent perspective is difficult, Kierkegaard believes it is essential. In *Works of Love*, he argues that carrying no awareness of the eternal nature of self and others may lead to numerous relational inequalities and ultimately produce negative abjection:

> . . . the meek woman in relationship to the overbearing man, the poorly endowed and yet vain person in relationship to the richly endowed, the poor and yet only worldly-concerned man in relationship to the "all-powerful man," the very subordinate and yet

Such questions continue to be raised in Nabokov's first novel composed in English--*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941). Presented as the narrator V.'s attempt to construct a biography of his half-brother, the famous writer Sebastian Knight, the story ends up being a great deal about V. himself. Some have read V. as another shady Nabokovian narrator who, in fact, is actually Knight.[8] Others see the novel as a discourse about the inaccuracy of any (auto)biography, the unknowability of any "self."[9] V.'s final sentence perhaps suggests that the notion of *selfhood* is only an illusion: "[T]ry as I may, I cannot get out of my part: Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom

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> earthly-minded person in relationship to the master--they will know of no other expression for the relationship than to abase themselves and throw themselves away" (128).

[8] As Katherine O'Connor explains, "The curious identification of the narrator with his subject has, in fact, led one critic (Andrew Field) to conclude that the narrator and his subject are one and the same person and that *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is Sebastian's own fictional biography of himself" (283). O'Connor believes that the more important parallel, however, lies in the similarity between both V. and Sebastian with Nabokov himself: "Just as Sebastian, the fictional author, created a book in which two characters emerge as different disguises of one and the same person, so Nabokov, the real author, has created a fictional biography in which the biographer and his subject are often curiously indistinguishable" (289).

[9] K. A. Bruffee categorizes *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* as an "elegiac romance," in which "the central theme is self-discovery and self-regeneration, not, as it may first appear, the discovery and revelation of another person's soul" (188). "V tells his tale," Bruffee believes, "primarily to shake off the burden of memory which Sebastian represents, and thereby attain his birthright, autonomy. The narrator's goal is also the understanding and freedom which come with that self-attainment" (190). Michael Wood, however, interprets the ending as follows: "V is Sebastian in that Sebastian has become inescapable, he will never again untangle Sebastian from his life; a haunting. But Sebastian is only a role that has stuck to him; he does not possess Sebastian's past or memory or 'real life,' and has quite different gifts" (52). Furthermore, he writes, "Sebastian Knight is fiction several times over: Nabokov's, ours, V's, that of several other characters in the novel, perhaps his own. But fiction in this sense is not opposed to reality, it is a construction and construal of it" (54). Similarly, Dabney Stuart says, "Thus, Sebastian's work is a mask behind which he hides himself; yet it is the chief source of his identity. The novel that the narrator is composing (and we are reading) is itself a mirror of Sebastian's work, and the narrator is really seeking himself when he seeks the identity of Sebastian. The self is, therefore, an imaginative construct, an artistic composition" (322). Stuart connects his interpretation to the larger issue of epistemology, echoing the philosophical questions that seem foregrounded by Cincinnatus' crime in *Invitation to a Beheading*:

> For Nabokov's concern, which is reiterated in different guises in all his work, is the primary concern of our century, and, to some extent, of Western man since the Renaissance: it is the morality of knowledge, the very nature of knowledge, which is to say the nature of man, the only thinking creature . . . and the only creature who can direct

neither of us knows" (203).

Just as in James' novels, the performative self, the self only playing socially conditioned roles, is clearly called upon here, but is also put into question. V.'s conception of "mask" as a concealment that permanently "clings" to the face recalls Judith Butler's analysis of the term in *Gender Trouble*:

> [T]his free-floating 'refusal' [of alternate gender identity] is linked in a significant way to the mask. If every refusal is, finally, a loyalty to some other bond in the present or the past, refusal is simultaneously preservation as well. The mask thus conceals this loss, but preserves (and negates) this loss through its concealment. . . . Dominated through appropriation, every refusal fails, and the refuser becomes part of the very identity of the refused, indeed, becomes the psychic refuse of the refused. The loss of the object is never absolute because it is redistributed within a psychic/ corporeal boundary that expands to incorporate that loss. (49-50)

In wearing a mask, if a person is in some way refusing himself, he is, at the same time, choosing to become both the person posing in the guise of this mask and simultaneously the one who chooses *not* to appear as what is concealed. A mask tells a story, then, about the one who wears it, even as in wearing that mask one is changed. Applying the analysis of Butler, V.'s complicated end to this story may be understood as a psychological move to collapse and even become the distance between self and other. Pretending to wear the "mask" of Sebastian Knight, V. can be seen as both appropriating

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his consciousness towards himself and therefore split himself into pieces. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is about Humpty-Dumpty, and Humpty-Dumpty is you and I. (328)

his half-brother's supposed literary successes (thus shoring up his own insecure identity), as well as preserving the loved person he has lost.

V.'s riddle-like comment--"I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I"--also points to Nabokov's questioning of the self's epistemology. Kristeva's interpretation of *Sebastian Knight*, for instance, is that the novel suggests the difficulty of knowing any self that is constantly changing (as we all are): "Like a boomerang, deceit, which had truly speaking uprooted the maternal bond, pulling it up from all soil in order to shelter it only in scription's fleeting memory, affects in the end the image and the body of the writer [Sebastian] himself . . . [,] the very memory that guarantees our identity is shown to be an ongoing metamorphosis, a polymorphy" (*Strangers* 37). So immersed in the biographical details of his brother's life, the narrator ultimately takes on traits of his brother, Sebastian, and comes to identify himself thoroughly with the same markers that defined his brother. Or, so split in his own self-understanding that his self as novelist has taken on an entirely separate identity from his self as autobiographer, Sebastian (like the narrator of *The Eye*) writes about himself in third person. Either way the novel is interpreted, Nabokov has succeeded in making questions of selfhood, made visible through the abject self, unavoidable. He seems to point toward the unknowability of any self *by* itself.

Unknowability does not preclude existence, however. Discussing this issue in Nabokov's work, Michael Wood remarks, "The very notion of the mask implies a face" (21), and Brian Boyd argues, "In Nabokov's world, murder matters, because other people exist. A murderer acts as if another were only other, not a self in his or her own right. A lover, per contra, can treat the other as a self that matters at least as much as one's own"

(86). Whether "selves" are mere illusion, only socially scripted roles, or innate, there still remains the face underneath, the one who wears the mask--the one who is revealed through abjection and the desire to be recognized by an Other. In choosing a shadowy narrator such as V., Nabokov illustrates Garzilli's point that "[t]he personality of anyone, consequently, is as contingent and relative as are his many poses; art makes the contingent permanent and endows it with the quality of necessity. The mask now is the composite construction of the viewer as well as the viewed" (87). The view of selfhood as merely a mask one wears thus applies especially well to the world of the novel, particularly when the novel's subject, as in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, is purportedly the writing of another's biography.

Combining the philosophical questions of character authorship and selfhood that he employed in these earlier novels, Nabokov creates Kinbote, the wacky but genuine narrator of his masterpiece *Pale Fire* (1962). The textual games of *Pale Fire* have generated a wide spectrum of critical discussion and disagreement: from Mary McCarthy's early praise to Dwight MacDonald and George Steiner's early censure;[10] from those who have argued that Kinbote is a creation of Shade's to those who believe

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[10] In the first review of *Pale Fire*, Mary McCarthy gives the novel high marks: "This is no giggling, high-pitched, literary camp. The repetitions, reflections, misprints, and quirks of Nature are taken as signs of the presence of a pattern, the stamp or watermark of a god or an intelligence" (Page 133-34). She goes on to write, "In the exuberant high spirits, the wild laughter of the book, there is a cry of pure pain" (135). In contrast, Dwight MacDonald completed the book only out of a sense of obligation: "Nagged on by professional duty, I did stagger on to the end, like a sober man trudging through the confetti and festoons of an interminable mardi gras. It seemed to me high-class doodling. . ." (Page 138). Perhaps worse, MacDonald equates Nabokov as author with Kinbote as commentator: "I am no foe of parody, but this parody seemed to be almost as boring as its object; one soon begins to suspect that the parodist has more in common with the parodee than he will admit, or perhaps than he is aware of" (Page 139). Similarly, George Steiner concludes, "Neither the acrobatics of a passionate comber of dictionaries nor the occasional stroke of deep, private candor can make *Pale Fire* glow. . . . The book is a pedantic witticism spun out at great length and solemnity. More than he is aware, Nabokov has fallen victim to the arcane, cobwebbed self-indulgence of the academic milieu he so deftly mocks" (Page 141).

that Shade is, rather, a product of Kinbote's imagination; and from those who find it a self-contained, pointless parody to those who see its humor as profoundly serious. I tend to side with David Rampton as he asserts that "There is no reason to doubt the existence of the basic fictional data" (*Critical* 149). I see no need to assume that either Shade or Kinbote dreamed up his co-star of the narrative. And while I enjoy Nabokov's linguistic wit, I think there is more to the book than a scavenger hunt for humor. Page Stegner suggests that if reading *Pale Fire* consists only in a mental chess game for literary professionals, then the novel may indeed be a waste of paper: "If our research informs us of something that we already know--that we are playing an erudite game with an intelligent man--or if it leads us only in ever-widening circles in search of a joke, or a pun, or a multilanguage anagram, then we may legitimately question the value of our labors" (131). Yet, as some critics have noted, between the funny lines of *Pale Fire* are some issues that most people do not always laugh about: love, suicide, madness, and death. Michael Wood, for example, argues in *The Magician's Doubts*: "The novel is light and funny in all kinds of marvellous ways, but we shall miss everything if we miss its darkness" (186).

Pale Fire's central characters are notable for their abject sense of self. Hazel Shade, Gradus, and Kinbote all display characteristics which categorize them as cut off from others and as outside the system of functioning subject/object relationships. Hazel and Gradus both leave the text by committing suicide, an act that literally *ab-jects* the self by throwing life away. Kinbote, as a (supposedly) exiled king, as a homosexual, as Botkin, and as an outcast of Wordsmith's faculty, has been abjected by others. Furthermore, Kinbote believes he needs Shade and Shade's poetry to confirm his

delusional identity. Each instance of abjection is an illustration of how a self cannot function normally in relationships with others if that self is not adequately defined by a boundary that separates it from the psychological abject.

Traces of abjection are numerous in *Pale Fire*. Kinbote's vegetarianism, which readers first learn of in the Foreword (21), is described later as a revulsion towards "animal matter" and the "contaminated greens" which meat has touched on his plate (230). In that same meal scene, Kinbote's dislike of dining with senior citizens is a further illustration of the abject nature of a process like eating: "I find nothing more conducive to the blunting of one's appetite than to have none but elderly persons sitting around one at table, fouling their napkins with the disintegration of their make-up, and surreptitiously trying . . . to dislodge the red-hot torture point of a raspberry seed from between false gum and dead gum" (230). Kinbote's own supposed dining preferences are forbidden by a note he finds in Goldsworth's refrigerator, saying "'No national specialties with odors hard to get rid of' should be placed therein" (84). Pickiness or revulsion related to food constitutes one of the most basic experiences of the abject. As Kristeva points out, "Food in this instance designates the other (the natural) that is opposed to the social condition of man and penetrates the self's clean and proper body" (*Powers* 75).

Similarly, Gradus is often connected with pictures of bodily abjectness. In one scene depicting his morning routine, we learn that he constantly wears socks--"not since July 11 . . . had he seen his bare feet" (273)--and that "as usual he started his blurry daily existence by blowing his nose" (273). He "coarsely enjoy[s] a coarse meal" (276) and proceeds to deal with a "not so good sea swell undulating in his entrails" (278). Gradus'

indigestion leads to frequent trips to the bathroom on the day of his crime and an amusing stop in "Vault P. Here" of the Wordsmith library (282). Defecation and death, two primary enactments of abjection, are clearly juxtaposed in the climax of the Commentary.

As in *The Eye* and *Despair*, all of *Pale Fire*'s references to mirrors and reflections are related to abjection as well, from the opening image of "the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane" (33) to "Sudarg of Bokay," the Zemblan mirror-maker with the much-noted name that is an anagram of "Jacob Gradus." The name "Zembla" itself is another echo of Nabokov's mirror motif. Lacan's theory of identity formation seems to be mimicked when King Charles, while escaping from Zembla, is assisted by multitudes of Zemblans pretending to be him. This leads to Charles' seeing the false reflection of himself in the pool on Mt. Kronberg: "What seemed to be at first blush an optical illusion" ends "as his red-sweatered, red-capped doubleganger turned and vanished, whereas he, the observer, remained immobile" (143). Shortly after this scene the King notices a person who had been injured in the Glass Works explosion reading a newspaper: "All the art of plastic surgery had only resulted in a hideous tessellated texture with parts of pattern and parts of outline seeming to change, to fuse or to separate, like fluctuating cheeks and chins in a distortive mirror" (146). Readers can understand this anonymous figure as a metaphor of Kinbote's own distorted self-image. Seeing himself duplicated by dozens "pretending to be" King Charles, Kinbote reveals his own weak subjectivity. As Garzilli writes, "*The I must be distinguished from the stories that it tells about itself,* as well as from the stories that others foist upon it. Since the myth of the I is the creation of the other who views the I, it is a fiction or construction. Hence the I is not one but one hundred thousand. The I becomes no one because the origin of the

hundred thousand always eludes self" (86). This sense of mass self-replication is precisely what Kinbote describes in his fantasy. Due to his need to be able to identify himself everywhere, the entire Commentary becomes the reader's attempt to separate Kinbote from the stories he tells about himself.

The looming presence of death in the novel is another way that abjection haunts all the characters from the margins of human subjectivity. Much of Shade's poem itself concerns the death of Hazel and the fear of dissolution after death. He feels that death has haunted him since the seizure he had in childhood: "A thread of subtle pain, / Tugged at by playful death, released again, / But always present, ran through me" (38). Through the humorous anecdotes about "I.P.H.," the "Institute of Preparation for the Hereafter," the constant presence of death during life remains a theme of Shade's poem: "For we die every day; oblivion thrives / Not on dry thighbones but on blood-ripe lives, / And our best yesterdays are now foul piles / Of crumpled names, phone numbers and foxed files" (52). These "piles," "names," and "files" remain as abject traces of human time, discarded remnants of human relationships that have lost their meaning.

Abjection is also presented in terms of unmet desire in *Pale Fire*. The two women with whom King Charles has heterosexual experiences are both described in abject terms. Disa's letter to him is translated "I desire you and love you when you flog me" (205), and Fleur de Fyler, after seeing the King years after their original "romance," says to him, "'Kiss me' . . . and was like a limp, shivering ragdoll in his arms for a moment" (214). Like James' heroines, both Zemblan females illustrate a love that desires the other to such an extent that the self is abandoned. This attitude also echoes a line from early in Shade's poem, in which life beckons to him "like some little lad forced

by a wench / With his pure tongue her *abject* thirst to quench" (38, italics added). Even some non-human objects mentioned in *Pale Fire* suggest the separate, unmatched state of abjection. In Goldsworth's study Kinbote sees "an old but unused pocket diary optimistically maturing there until its calendric correspondencies came around again" (84). And Kinbote relates "one of our sillier Zemblan proverbs" in the Foreword that states "*the lost glove is happy*" (17). The lost glove, which clearly is only half of a pair and may be useless without its counterpart, can be read here as an abject item.

Like the lost glove, Hazel Shade's existence is first indicated by her absence through lines from her father's poem. Shade mentions "The phantom of my little daughter's swing" (35) and tells Sibyl he loves her "most / When with a pensive nod you greet her ghost" (43). When readers do meet Hazel in Canto ▮, she is a child that others pity. Though intelligent, she is unattractive and socially inept. While Hazel is young, her mother says optimistically, "She may not be a beauty, but she's cute"; yet by her daughter's teen years, Sibyl's words had changed: "Virgins have written some *resplendent* books. / Lovemaking is not everything. Good looks / Are not *that* indispensable!" (44). Though Sibyl has written off a romantic future for her daughter, she still sees potential for her in other areas of life; Shade, however, has years ago settled into a mood of pity and grief regarding Hazel. After she appears in an elementary school play "as Mother Time, / A bent charwoman with slop pail and broom," Shade says "like a fool I sobbed in the men's room" (44). Despite whatever optimistic attitude they adopt towards Hazel, Shade fears that "still the demons of our pity spoke" (44). Wood offers valuable insight about Shade's presentation of his daughter: "The clichés" of Hazel's botched blind date and suicide, he says,

> suggest that Nabokov at least, if not Shade, knows there is something seriously wrong here. But even Shade understands that pity is demonic, a destructive, unwelcome emotion. . . . What troubles us (troubles me) is Shade's and Sybil's assumption that pity in this case, however unwelcome, is unquestionably the right emotion, entirely grounded, what anyone would feel. . . . My suggestion is simply that Hazel's parents' pity must be part of the problem, and seems weirdly foregrounded in Shade's consciousness, and therefore in ours. (195-96)

Her parents' eyes are mirrors reflecting back toward Hazel the shame and pity they feel about her. Her flawed subjectivity to some extent must be blamed on their attitudes towards her. As Laing explains, "It is clear that a person's 'own' identity can never be completely abstracted from his identity-for-others. His identity-for-himself depends to some extent on the identity others ascribe to him, but also on the identities he attributes to the others, and hence on the identity or identities he attributes to the other(s) as attributing to him" (75). Hazel bears this unspoken pity from her parents, and thus she becomes abject, in part, because of her parents' perception that abjection is in fact the (pitiable) state she is in.

Evidence of this occurs when Shade indicates that Hazel, while growing up, internalizes this shame about her physical appearance. He writes that she "hardly ever smiled, and when she did, / It was a sign of pain." "With eyes / Expressionless" she would "sit on her tumbled bed / Spreading her swollen feet, scratching her head / With psoriatic fingernails" (45). The description itself is pitiful. When Pete Dean, on his blind date with her, suddenly has "forgotten an appointment with a chum," readers know she is

in pain when "with a smile / She said she'd be *de trop*, she'd much prefer / Just going home" (47). By identifying herself as "*de trop*," as superfluous, Hazel overtly names herself as an abject figure, an extra, a misfit.[11] She is a disconnected subject easily cast away from its potential object. After feeling abjected from others--from her parents, her peers, and Pete Dean--Hazel abjects herself by rejecting life: "A blurry shape stepped off the reedy bank / Into a crackling, gulping swamp, and sank" (51). Her suicide is a result of what Liz Constable calls "abject self-consciousness," which she defines as "the mortifying or humiliating feeling experienced by the little girl who has no sense that others respond to the 'real' body she inhabits" (184).[12] Furthermore, in "The Body of Signification," Elizabeth Gross defines abjection as "the unspoken of a stable speaking position, an abyss at the very borders of the subject's identity, a hole into which the subject may fall" (87). Such a definition itself is reminiscent of Hazel's literal fall

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[11] In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre also uses the phrase "de trop" in a description that applies remarkably well to Hazel's devaluing of herself when she feels unloved: "Whereas before being loved we were uneasy about that unjustified, unjustifiable protuberance which was our existence, whereas we felt ourselves '*de trop*,' we now feel that our existence is taken up and willed even in its tiniest details by an absolute freedom which at the same time our existence conditions and which we ourselves will with our freedom. This is the basis for the joy of love when there is joy: we feel that our existence is justified" (347).

[12] Critics disagree about the significance of Hazel to *Pale Fire*. Rampton reads her life primarily as a humorous episode that gives motivation to Shade's poem: "The event that leads directly to her death is in one sense a gag--college boy, ugly blind date--that Nabokov includes for our amusement. . . . The real reason for this death begins to seem more like the author's need to set up a locus of symbolic sorrow and less than anything else" ("*Pale*" 151). Shoshana Knapp takes Hazel's life and death far more seriously: "Before and after the games, however, there remains the character who supplies the emotional and artistic center of the poem and, perhaps, for the entire novel as well: Hazel Shade--misunderstood in life, mispresented in death" (105). Knapp interprets Hazel from a feminist perspective, noting that if she "had indeed been a man, her physical unattractiveness would not have been perceived as significant. The prizes in French and history would have been viewed as important rather than 'fun,' and homeliness would have handicapped her no more than it had the father she resembles" (110). Similarly, Nina Allan writes that "The key factor here seems to be that Hazel is a woman. Women in Nabokov are often intelligent, perceptive and inspiring . . . but they are given the role of muse to the artist rather than being actively creative themselves. . . . In Nabokov's world, then, Hazel has been set up with the wrong equipment. Her 'failure' as a woman cannot, for her, be compensated for by any prowess as an intellect, as Shade compensated for his rough exterior by the beauty of his poetry. . . . Whereas the Shades and the Luzhins of this world seem to have but one obstacle--their 'otherness'--to circumvent, Hazel has two: her otherness and her ugliness. The double burden is too much for her" (53).

through a hole in the lake's partially frozen ice.

In her discussion of "Abject Fathers and Suicidal Sons" in G. E. Lessing's play *Philotas*, Susan Gustafson explains a process of parental abjection which I believe also applies to Hazel's relationship with her parents. Gustafson writes, "The act of turning away from a character is a common sign of abjection in Lessing's works" (9). When viewers see "a veiling of the father's contorted body (face)," this indicates "a turning away from (abjection) of the daughter" (9). John Shade's hidden tears in the men's room after watching Hazel's play illustrate this very process. Furthermore, Gustafson explains how a father's detachment from his child can damage the child's ability to trust the security of subject/object relationships: "The abjectness of the father" can be read "as the underlying cause of melancholia. The father appeared, but failed to perform, damning the nascent subject to a life of hell--trapping, as Kristeva suggests, her/him in suffering" (22). Without using the language of abjection, Jean Walton comes to a similar conclusion about Hazel's portrayal: "Shade prefers to write about his grief at the death of his daughter while never, ironically, recognizing his own complicity with the system that prohibits her existence as an intelligible subject" (100). In *Pale Fire*, Hazel serves as an example of how the self when not defined and affirmed by others can establish no meaningful relationship with life itself.

Gradus is another character notable for his abjection. Kinbote first introduces us to the gunman by indicating how slippery Gradus' identity is: "Jakob Gradus called himself variously Jack Degree or Jacques de Grey, or James de Gray, and also appears in police records as Ravus, Ravenstone, and d'Argus" (77). To the extent that selfhood is pinpointed by identification with a single name, "Gradus" figures from the start as a loose

web of name associations and thus as a loosely defined *self*. Descriptions of Gradus add to this confusion, referring to him in animal- and machine-like terms: He is "a cross between bat and crab" (150), and "Mere springs and coils produced the inward movements of our clockwork man" (152). Gradus is also portrayed as unintelligent. His opinions are noted as "a by-product of the man's hopeless stupidity" (152). An amusing list of reading materials is given to illustrate his mental deficiency: "As many people of little culture, Gradus was a voracious reader of newspapers, pamphlets, chance leaflets and the multilingual literature that comes with nose drops and digestive tablets; but this summed up his concessions to intellectual curiosity" (232). The generality and banality of his preferred literature suggests that Gradus lacks the mental life that accompanies developed personhood.

An even more frightening view of Gradus' lack of self, however, emerges in the descriptions that indicate his interpersonal and moral bankruptcy. In the closest thing we get to his biography, Kinbote explains that the assassin had once been married, had been abandoned by his wife, and had then "lived in sin with his mother-in-law until she was removed, blind and dropsical, to an asylum for decayed widows" (253). Since that time, Gradus "had long stopped drinking. He did not go to concerts. He did not gamble." And he "had tried several times to castrate himself" (252). Far removed from social connection, love, desire, and sex, Gradus was thus able coldly to plan and enact his intended murder precisely because he was completely outside the matrix of interpersonal meaning. As Kinbote writes, "Spiritually he did not exist. Morally he was a dummy pursuing another dummy. The fact that his weapon was a real one, and his quarry a highly developed human being, this fact . . . had no meaning" (278). In every facet of his

life, Gradus functions as an incomplete person. As Rampton puts it, Gradus "represents the plebian assumption that animal satisfaction and death are all there is" (*Vladimir* 111).

Gradus' abjection is further indicated by some less obvious moments in the text which recall abjection theory itself. Kinbote foreshadows Gradus' suicide by using a mirror image that reflects the famous opening "waxwing" line of Shade's poem: Gradus, "too, is to meet, in his urgent and blind flight, a reflection that will shatter him" (135). Readers also learn that he picks up certain social habits without realizing it, in blind imitation of other people: he "displayed his empty palm before shaking hands or made a slight bow after every sip, and [imitated] other tricks of demeanor (which Gradus himself did not notice in people but had acquired from them)" (197). In a later scene when he is talking to a representative of the anonymous Zemblan "conspirators" on the phone, he experiences a breakdown of language and communicative ability: "Each side . . . had forgotten the meaning of certain phrases pertaining to the other's vocabulary so that in result, their tangled and expensive talk combined charades with an obstacle race in the dark" (215). In these instances Gradus mirrors others in meaningless displays of mis-signification and cannot participate in intelligible use of language--both of which lacks are characteristics related to the function of abjection in the formation of a unified, speaking subject.[13]

In her essay "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,"

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[13] Douglas Fowler also does a good job of describing Gradus' physical and functional abjection within the text: "Nabokov fully intends that the life and the poetry and the rationality and the value of John Shade are to be juxtaposed with the forces of antilife and absurdity and antivalue embodied in the grubby little gunman, who drips with diarrhea as he stumbles through the makeshift arrangements of fate to perform for Nabokov the esthetically desirable task of eliminating John Shade from the fiction to which he is dramatically irrelevant" (96). An interpretation from M. Keith Booker's analysis of the novel *Nightwood* is

Barbara Creed discusses the relationship between the abject and horror movies. She explains that "Although the subject must exclude the abject, it must, nevertheless, be tolerated, for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life" (38). Similarly, Gradus is "tolerated" in the text of *Pale Fire* as a walking threat of death, reminding readers that Shade's life is in jeopardy. By defining the boundaries of what is legal in a society, the law also functions as an agent of abjection by labeling all illegal activities as abject. Thus, as Creed writes, "Abjection also occurs where the individual fails to respect the law and where the individual is a hypocrite, a liar, a traitor" (39). This echoes Kristeva's explanation as well: "Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality. . . . Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady" (*Powers* 4). Gradus, in his intended murder of King Charles, meets the qualifications of the abject criminal. Kinbote includes numerous descriptions of Gradus who has "a sordid purpose in his heart and a loaded gun in his pocket" (78), drawing closer and closer to the community of New Wye. Furthermore, Gradus relishes his role as murderer: he "would not have killed anybody had he not derived pleasure not only from the imagined act . . . but also from having been given an important, responsible assignment (which happened to require he should kill)" (279).

In the Commentary of *Pale Fire*, Gradus thus functions as a walking, talking embodiment of human abjection. Particularly in his animalized and robotic descriptions,

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strikingly applicable to the character of Gradus as well: "The repression of Robin Vote as half-human, half-animal thus functions as an overt symbol of the emergence of the abject side of human existence" (219).

he displays an extraordinary incapacity for relationship. Yet, the question of interpretation hovers over these appearances of Gradus in the text because they are all filtered through Kinbote's Zemblan fantasy. If we interpret the gunman as merely the character concocted by Kinbote to fulfill the role of assassin in his mental charade, if the real "Gradus" is Jack Grey seeking revenge on Judge Goldsworth who had sent him to prison, then the real murderer, though certainly abject in criminal terms, was not nearly as exaggeratedly abject as the "half-man" who "was also half-mad" (279) in whom Kinbote believed. If Gradus, the Commentary character, is only an actor in Kinbote's imagination, then perhaps his imagined presence illustrates an internalized sort of abjection that Borch-Jacobsen describes based on Lacanian psychology:

> I will be able to meet myself, run into myself in mirrors, struggle with my doubles, love myself in them while hating myself, project myself into them while losing myself. But then I will no longer be what "I am," in the invisible and untheorizable affect of my identification. I will be, as Lacan rightly says, "alienated"--but alienated because I will seek myself in objects, whereas I am no "ego" and no "object." (71)

Through the imagined character of Gradus, in other words, Kinbote is able both to fear and to celebrate a personification of utter inhumanity, of a cruelty so vapid and uncaring that it would be capable of robbing him of the other--John Shade--with which his own self so desperately needs to identify. The abject qualities of Gradus thus may simply be further evidence for the abjection of Kinbote himself or, as Wood puts it, "a grey travesty of Kinbote's worst moments" (201).

Charles Kinbote's abjection clearly centers on his delusional belief that he is *not*

himself but, rather, the exiled King Charles II of the kingdom Zembla.[14] He first only hints to readers about his former identity, saying "I who have not shaved now for a year, resemble my disguised king" (76). The King's parents are shady figures as well: his father, "Alfin the Vague," has an uncertain year of death "due to the coincident calendar change from Old Style to New" (101). His mother, Queen Blenda, is barely mentioned, yet it is noted that Charles "had had no love for his mother," and after her death "the hopeless and helpless remorse he now felt degenerated into a sickly physical fear of her phantom" (109). Haunted by the maternal body of a mother he had no affection for, Charles the King (and Charles Kinbote) also has a strong distaste for women.

In his discussion of abjection in *Antigone*, Clifford Davis explains how aggression against the feminine is a necessary process of the subject's development. In the state of initial union and symbiosis with the mother, "the semiotic is inextricably associated with the maternal body and becomes an antagonistic, excluded, linguistic Other" (Davis 6). For the child to become a subject in its own right, the mother must be cast off and turned into an object. Thus the mother, as discarded object, is then "transmuted into the *abject*, which threatens and challenges the Symbolic from its banished, hidden position. As a

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[14] Many critics have noted that Charles Kinbote himself seems to be a step removed from reality, since his name is an anagram of "Botkin," a personage who hovers strangely in the text and is defined in the Index as an "American scholar of Russian descent" (306). Regarding this complication, I agree with Michael Wood's analysis: "Botkin is the static in Kinbote's story, the buzz and the hum of repression, the self Kinbote has buried. What we must say though, I think, is that we don't know enough about Botkin to treat him as the 'real', founding person, the man behind the mask. Kinbote has buried Botkin pretty successfully; only a few shreds of his former self cling to his new invention, so his new invention is what we have. Botkin's role in the novel is not to tell the hidden truth, deliver the crown jewels, but to remind us, eerily, that Kinbote's self *is* invented, precarious; that it has a past or has a double" (178). A further comment from Wood is humorous in his suggesting a reader's early responses to Kinbote's identity: "We wonder at first, I think, what kind of text this is; but soon wonder more seriously whose text it is, and what is the matter with him" (181).

result, the excluded object, the *abject*, becomes frightening and subversive" (7-8).[15]

Illustrating this principle, Kinbote's derogatory comments about women are so numerous that they become an expected refrain in the novel. His attitude is established in the Foreword when he mentions a waitress as a "pulpous pony-tailed girl student who served us and licked her pencil" (21), claims (ironically) to have no recollection of the "stunning blonde in the black leotard who haunts Lit. 202" (21), and hates the "fiery-haired whore" who had stayed with his friend "bad Bob" and "had left her combings and reek in all three bathrooms" of the house (26-27). In addition to these examples, Kinbote tells us that in a skit on campus he "was pictured as a pompous woman hater with a German accent" (25). Kinbote's dislike for Sibyl is also evident. He makes fun of her mental capacity at one point, equating a deep expression on her face "with so rapt a look . . . that one might have supposed she had just thought up a new recipe" (91). He also declares, with perhaps too much defensiveness, that "From the very first I tried to behave with the utmost courtesy toward my friend's wife, and from the very first she disliked and distrusted me" (171). His anti-woman sentiment is even evident in the Index: under "Odon," Kinbote mentions that his childhood friend "ought not to marry that blubber-lipped cinemactress, with untidy hair" (311).

King Charles, not surprisingly, has similar reactions to most of the women he encounters. Garh, the farmer's daughter he meets during his flight from Onhava, is described as like other "Zemblan mountain girls" who "are as a rule mere mechanisms of

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[15] M. Keith Booker explains further the relationship between the abject and the feminine or maternal thus: "The traditional notion of woman as figure of the physical aspect of life has often been associated with the revulsion of abjection: woman implies the physical, implies the mortal, implies death. . . . Indeed, the stereotypical views of woman as physical being and of woman as ideal ethereal creature, though apparent polar opposites, are quite intimately related, both having to do with the repression of abjection" (228-29).

haphazard lust" and thus inappropriately "flooded her embarrassed companion with all the acridity of ungroomed womanhood" (142). Disa, the wife that is forced upon the King, is equally repulsive to him. Despite efforts with "aphrodisiacs," their marriage remained unconsummated because "the anterior characters of her unfortunate sex kept fatally putting him off" (208). Fleur de Fyler, the King's earlier girlfriend, fares the best in his memory of her, yet even she is called "pretty yet not repellent (as some cats are less repugnant than others to the good-natured dog told to endure the bitter effluvium of an alien genus)" (112). In all their dealings with women, both Kinbote and King Charles display a pronounced sense of revulsion towards the feminine.

Thus Kinbote's anti-women jokes and comments may result from this fear of the maternal and function as a repression of the abject. This seems especially likely in view of the King's dreams of Disa and the fact that "his dream-love for her exceeded in emotional tone, in spiritual passion and depth, anything he had experienced in his surface existence" (210). He "dreamed of her more often, and with incomparably more poignancy, than his surface-life feelings for her warranted" (209). While asleep, the abject feminine constituted no threat to Charles, and he could enjoy union with a female other without fear of dissolution. Yet, during waking hours the actual Disa "in any other antechamber of time, forever remained exactly as she looked on the day he had first told her he did not love her" (209). The king instead preferred his "Zemblan calisthenics" with boys (26), just as Kinbote preferred ping pong with promising male students.

Whether or not Kinbote's homosexuality also enacts this repression of the feminine abject, the state of homosexuality itself is often categorized as a form of abjection. Walton calls Kinbote a character who is "abjected by the hetero hegemony"

and who, "in his transgression of sexual, literary, social, and rational codes, has challenged the heterosexual imperative insofar as he refuses to occupy the subject position of one who is sick and thereby seeks a cure" (92). According to Judith Butler's formulation of sexual identity, "Those bodily figures who do not fit into either gender fall outside the human, indeed, constitute the domain of the dehumanized and the abject against which the human itself is constituted" (111). Eric Savoy explains further, "In Butler's argument, *all* sexual 'identities' are predicated upon the exclusion of other possibilities, which are relegated to the domain of the abject, and as such haunt the permeable border of identity with subversive power: 'identity', she insists, is but another name for a profoundly melancholic relation with the repudiated abject" (170).[16] What one chooses to be, in other words, shows what one has lost through repression. In Kristeva's description of homosexuality, "The object of love then becomes unmentionable, a double of the subject, similar to it, but improper, because inseparable from an impossible identity. Loving desire is thus felt as an inner fold within that impossible identity, as an accident of narcissism, ob-ject, painful alteration, delightfully and dramatically condemned to find the other in the same sex only" (*Powers* 21). Kinbote's abjection is

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[16] Robert Reid-Pharr provides an interesting analysis of abjection related to homosexuality in "Tearing the Goat's Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection and the Production of a Late Twentieth-Century Black Masculinity." He quotes Diana Fuss: "Those inhabiting, the inside . . . can only comprehend the outside through incorporation of a negative image. This process of negative interiorization involves turning homosexuality inside out, exposing not the homosexual's abjected insides but the homosexual as the abject, as the contaminated and expurgated insides of the heterosexual subject" (372). The connection he draws between abjection and a defined racial identity in America could be read as analogous to the very struggle Kinbote faces as a foreign homosexual: "I would suggest that abjection is characterized by an excess of meaning. As a consequence, we might use the figure of the abject to access 'slips' in the ideological structures of modernity . . . . We must empty our consciousness of that which is contradictory and ambiguous and most especially that which disallows our differentiation. Still we seem not to be able to complete this process. We become uncomfortable with 'realness' at precisely those moments when it appears to be most firmly established. Even as the profligate subject is destroyed, we retain 'him' within

illustrated, then, both through his extreme dislike of women and through his homosexuality.

Pale Fire centers on Kinbote's efforts to read his own supposed experience in the text of John Shade's poem. Much of the novel's humor also arises from the misreadings which mean so much to the mad commentator. As Ciaran Cosgrove puts it, "Kinbote's commentary is resolutely inappropriate and off the point. . . . John Shade's poem is a pretext for Charles Kinbote's writing out of himself in as prolix and scatterbrained a way as he pleases" (197). Cosgrove adds, "The poem is pale fire indeed when compared with the batty commentary" (200). Kinbote's relationship with Shade and his narcissistic critical commentary thus constitute the most elaborate and most humorous exploration of abjection in the text. From the first pages of the Foreword, Kinbote indicates how important it is to him that his readers understand the profound depth, as he saw it, of his relationship to John Shade. He feels that the faculty at Wordsmith do not appreciate the poet and criticizes them for "taking Shade for granted, instead of drenching every nerve, so to speak, in the romance of his presence" (27). Kinbote is so sure that Shade's masterpiece poem is about King Charles and Zembla that he says he "discussed making recordings of [his own] voice for [Shade's] use" (81). Kinbote sees himself as indispensably necessary to Shade since he, as disguised king, is the star of Shade's epic.

Readers of *Pale Fire*, however, soon learn that the reverse is the case. Shade is the one who is indispensable to Kinbote's own sense of self and identity. Kinbote sees himself as the homeless exile, "the royal fugitive" who has found a needed "refuge in the

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the national consciousness, always on the brink of renewal, lest we find ourselves entrapped within a logic of subjectivity from which the Black is excluded already" (374).

vaults of the variants [Shade] has preserved" (81). Echoing the poem's title, he indicates that Shade has been his personal and literary inspiration by figuring Shade as the sun and himself as the dull moon, an abject figure dependent upon the borrowed light from a truly illuminated subject: "In many cases [I] have caught myself borrowing a kind of opalescent light from my poet's fiery orb" (81). Kinbote's abject conception of himself is also revealed as he identifies, strangely, with Shade's pipe: Shade "continued to clean the bowl of his pipe as fiercely as if it were my heart he was hollowing out" (91). And his dependence on Shade, as object of voyeurism and assumed best friend, is further emphasized by how disturbed he is at the thought of the Shades going on a vacation. Kinbote explains how much this upsets him, saying "One gets so accustomed to another's life running alongside one's own that a sudden turn-off on the part of the parallel satellite causes in one a feeling of stupefaction, emptiness, and injustice" (181-82). Clearly the drama of Kinbote's emotion here far exceeds any appropriate sentiment or reciprocity on Shade's part, especially considering that Kinbote was not even invited to Shade's birthday party. Kinbote interprets this, as a child would, as an insult in friendship negotiations.[17]

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[17] In discussing Kinbote's need to believe that Shade is writing about him, Maaja Stewart refers to the novel's epigraph from Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* as a basis for drawing parallels between that friendship and the friendship of Shade and Kinbote. In both cases, she believes, "The desire and the deceit of the biographer become so overwhelming that they consume the living subject" (232). Stewart argues that, like Kinbote's,

> Boswell's existence was not real to himself until someone else or the written page reflected that reality back to him. . . . Johnson's main function for Boswell, then, resembles Shade's main function for Kinbote: to transfuse into him calmness and certainty, to hold at bay the complexity and chaos of experience, to stabilize the constantly shifting roles, the fluctuations of mood from doubt to arrogance, from melancholy to elation. (236-37)

In other words, both Boswell and Kinbote had an unstable, dim sense of self that gravitated toward the literary personality, the genius whose "pale fire" they could borrow, or steal, to ensure their own life's sense of meaning.

Kinbote's outsider status among the Wordsmith faculty is yet a further indication of his social abjection. Readers realize at various points that his coworkers are laughing at him, and not with him; that the wrestler's note meant that he had "halitosis" and not "hallucinations" (98). He indicates how his colleagues did not want Shade's manuscript left in his hands after the poet's death; he even includes a copy of the letter circulated about him that says he "is known to have a deranged mind" (195) and thus they (justifiably) do not trust him to provide an adequate commentary on the poem. The Index also provides insight into the way others treat Kinbote, indicating that his homosexuality may have been a further source of his alienation. An entry under "Kinbote" indicates his own "loathing for a person who makes advances, and then betrays a noble and naive heart, telling foul stories about his victim and pursuing him with brutal practical jokes" (309). As Marie-Florine Bruneau explains, "Abjection and its accompanying rites, woven of fear and of exclusion, have to do with the elaboration of a group identity. Abjection obeys an imperative of demarcation" and "has to do with the necessity to demarcate the limits to the needs of the elaboration of identity in the face of a fear of indifferentiation" (31-32). Kinbote himself becomes the abject whose nationality, sexual identity, and odd sociability threaten the collective selfhood of the Wordsmith faculty; thus, Kinbote is necessarily repressed through cruelty and exclusion.[18]

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[18] David Rampton reads Kinbote's outsider status as both a source of humor and pathos. On the one hand, Kinbote "is the equivalent of a Humbert permanently outside the schoolyard, secure in the splendid onanistic seclusion of the parked car," and Nabokov, he believes, "is more interested in the fact that obsessed people are funny. This makes for a joke at Kinbote's expense every time a male character is mentioned" (*Critical* 151). Yet, Rampton also indicates the serious side of Kinbote's abjection, quoting Julia Bader: "Kinbote's is the agony which lies beneath all love relationships . . . [,] the realization that the essence of the beloved is unattainable" (153). Similarly, Peggy Ward Corn notes that Kinbote's great need to escape into a fantastical autobiography is generated by the grim circumstances of his real life: "King Charles escapes from Zembla, but Charles Kinbote escapes into it, making it possible for him to avoid the sad and ugly facts of his actual life as an aging homosexual no longer attractive to young men, friendless,

Kinbote's choice of a delusional identity provides another interesting indication of his delusional subjectivity. He is not an ordinary citizen from this lost kingdom but the deposed king whose life is still threatened by a mad assassin. The fantasy incorporates both a sense of power and a sense of paranoia which are strikingly opposite conditions of his relative powerlessness and invisibility in his community.[19] Allison Kimmich connects the notion of abjection with the concept of royal power in a way that seems particularly relevant to Kinbote:

> Literally, then, abject means outcast. . . . As its prefix suggests, the earliest uses of subject refer to a person ruled by a king or a prince. So while subject has come to mean a thinking individual and to carry with it the notion of autonomy in modern philosophical terms, it also means to be literally cast below, under the power or authority of others. . . . The threat of subjugation by another--perhaps of being designated abject--inheres in the idea of the independent subject. (224)

Subjects who successfully enter the realm of the Symbolic thus accede to relationship with objects in their life, or, in Kristeva's terms, to the law of the Father. In not functioning as an independent subject, Kinbote actually ***subjects*** himself to enormous need of others while paradoxically imagining himself as a king who willingly left his own country of subjects. By refusing to make permeable his boundaries and thus to accept

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ridiculous, reduced to voyeurism, testing the patience of the only man who tolerates him, John Shade" (86).

[19] Describing the psychological relevance of Kinbote's fantasy, Michael Wood writes that "it reads like a tale of dream and need . . . what Stendhalians would call an imaginary revenge, an endowing of the self with what it most conspicuously lacks" (179). Furthermore, Wood describes the process in kingship terms: "The unloved person invents for himself a world of power, a picture-book monarchy and endless sexual satisfaction, but all power has to be exercised in order to be felt, and the new world must have its unloved

"the threat of subjugation by another," he has instead walled himself into a mental fortress where he can reign, as Luzhin does, in safety as the imaginary king of his own world.

Underneath Kinbote's entire commentary, then, is a profound need to reinforce himself. Wood notices an example of this when he comments on the way Kinbote "describes his 'favorite photograph' of John Shade by referring almost entirely to himself" (182). Wood's further analysis also suggests the relationship between abjection and delusions of royalty: "The unloved person invents for himself a world of power, a picture-book monarchy and endless sexual satisfaction, but all power has to be exercised in order to be felt, and the new world must have its unloved ones, the excluded and the humiliated who will provide the fantasist with this triumph, but by the same token begin to resemble him as he is outside the fantasy" (184). Thus Kinbote, in part, copes with his own abjection by imaginatively abjecting others. He also fits the description of what Kristeva calls "the deject": "[T]he space that engrosses the deject, the excluded, is never *one*, nor ***homogeneous***, nor *totalizable*, but essentially divisible, foldable, catastrophic. A deviser of territories, languages, works, the ***deject*** never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines . . . constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh" (***Powers*** 8). These very psychological qualities of failed subjectivity, then, are what make Kinbote an amusing literary critic and a fascinating teller of Nabokov's unorthodox tale.

Theorists of abjection explain that traces of the relinquished merger with another

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ones, the excluded and the humiliated who will provide the fantasist with his triumph, but by the same token begin to resemble him as he is outside the fantasy" (184).

occur when the self fails to establish proper borders around the abject. In "Spectres of Abjection: The Queer Subject of James's 'The Jolly Corner,'" Eric Savoy writes, "In Freudian theory, melancholia arises from the subject's ambivalent and unresolved relation with the lost object, and it is precisely this ambivalence--this 'shadow' cast by the critical superego upon the ego's identifications--that produces the abject" (162). He goes on to say that "This abjected and hypothetical otherness haunts the subject precisely as the Freudian shadow of the lost object in the pathology of melancholia" (172). Applied to *Pale Fire*, this idea makes the name "Shade" reverberate psychologically, since it is through the figure of Shade that Kinbote is most haunted by the selfhood he is missing. Although Kinbote lurks around Shade's house like a ghost, it is Shade who is doing the haunting of Kinbote's mind by representing the loving identification that he lacks.

Following Shade's death, the eighty notecards upon which his poem is written become a sacred text for Kinbote. They are the only traces he has to the sun that once illuminated his life. Kinbote's confidence that he alone has the gift of correctly reading these notecards is asserted early in the Foreword. Bragging like Hermann in *Despair*, he declares that the poem's "Corrected Draft" "turns out to be beautifully accurate when you once make the plunge and compel yourself to open your eyes in the limpid depths under its confused surface. It contains not one gappy line, not one doubtful reading" (14). Another Nabokov character, in near defensive praising of himself, simultaneously points toward his own self's insecurity and weakness. Kinbote here also begins his personal identification with Shade's text, and we could make the analogous assumption that he is telling readers that the same degree of (blind) trust will be necessary to understand the

"beautiful accuracy" beneath the "confused surface" of his own (imagined) life's story. Kinbote believes that the twelve notecards containing variants which Shade saved from "the pale fire of the incinerator" are the very ones that had to do with him and with Zembla (15). In a show of greater defensiveness, he then asserts his biographical connection with the poem by insulting anyone who would attempt to take the poem out of his hands: "Such hearts, such brains, would be unable to comprehend that one's attachment to a masterpiece may be utterly overwhelming" (17). This attachment receives its full personification in the much-noted final scene of the Commentary, where Kinbote literally covers himself, his body, with Shade's notecards: "for several days [I] *wore* it, as it were, having distributed the ninety-two index cards about my person . . . plated with poetry, armored with rhymes, stout with another man's song, stiff with cardboard, bullet-proof at long last" (300). The strange feeling of invincibility that this poem-garment gives Kinbote is notable for its sexual and immortal overtones. Wearing the poem both makes him "stout" and "stiff" as well as shields him from the threat of death. Shade's poem here becomes Kinbote's security blanket, an anti-abjection shield which Kinbote believes gives him the magical power to experience virility without the complication of mortality.

In her discussion of *Pale Fire*, Lucy Maddox describes Kinbote's effort to see himself mirrored in Shade thus: "His purpose in writing the commentary was to discover and solidify an acceptable identity for himself through another man's life and art, to translate the man's art into signs and symbols of his own personal significance" (29). She sees in Kinbote's narcissism a source of humor at work in many of Nabokov's novels: "Frustrated sexual desire, as long as it is someone else's, is always a potentially

funny subject. . . . Taken in its largest context, the sexual desire of Nabokov's narrators is a perfectly appropriate synecdoche for that compulsive need to possess the world beyond the self, to possess it sexually and intellectually, that is the real subject of the novels" (10). These efforts towards mirroring and towards finding meaningful "signs and symbols" through the language of another are all instances of the subject's effort both to impossibly fuse with an object through a repression of abjection as well as to gain affirmation and confirmation as a defined subject in its own right. Furthermore, Maddox believes Kinbote's mad efforts reflect the misreading tendencies of us all: "We consistently distort texts because, like Kinbote, we want those texts to do too much for us. Nabokov suggests that as readers we all have a lurking suspicion that if we could only find the right way to read texts, we would be safer, less anxious, less frightened" (15). We cope with our fear of the abject by trying to read traces of ourselves into the lives, the texts, of others.

In life, however, the merger is never completely successful. To be *selves*, people must be bounded and separate from others. Any union, at best, is temporary and partial. To think otherwise is to misunderstand human subjectivity. In discussing the distortions of Kinbote's commentary, Robert Alter provides insight into the way abjection, as an experience of being outside oneself, can be detrimental: "Nabokov was acutely conscious of the ways in which the imagination could distort the world, envelop a person in a solipsistic bubble, impair the capacity for authentic intimate connection with other people" (139). Yet, Alter explains that the imaginative abjection of throwing off the self to see through another's eyes can also be beneficial: "Without imagination life can scarcely be thought of as human. But that very faculty, which provides us our keenest

gratifications in experiencing love, art, and the natural world, can be used to bend all things violently into its own shape . . . or alternately, it can offer the sweet substitute of its own seductive rhythms instead of engagement with the human other" (140-41).

Kinbote seems to be an illustration of this principle. *Pale Fire* raises the question of selfhood and particularly of what is to be concluded about a person like Kinbote. Assuming that his life in New Wye is accurate and that his experiences as King Charles are delusional, then we know that his fantasy has not taken over to the extent that he cannot function. He is an employed academic professional. As Stegner points out, "Kinbote, crazy as he may be, has actually *understood* Shade's poem, and has structured in his fantastic commentary a story that mirrors Shade's philosophical notion of a symmetrical fate" (128). The mad commentator is creative and intelligent. We realize, as Shade stands up for him in faculty discussions, that some degree of friendship indeed exists between them. Referring to the Summer School party scene where Shade informs someone that their insult is "the wrong word" to apply to Kinbote (238), Douglas Fowler writes, "there is a tinge of triumph in Kinbote's madness. Shade realizes that [so-called madness] should be viewed as a subjective accommodation to life's brutality rather than as a lunatic's masquerade" (119). Fowler also offers a positive reading of the commentator, suggesting that readers should make the same accommodations for Kinbote's eccentricity as Shade does. Kinbote's approach to life, love, faith, and literary scholarship, even when misguided, is exuberant. As Garzilli writes, "Nabokov provides a valuable service in the fact that he permits us to see that in all of us one of our selves is a clown whom we do not recognize as we take overseriously the problems of our paths to self" (138). Regarding Kinbote's delusion of identity, Laurie Clancy asks, "Who is to

say that [Kinbote's] existence is not thereby richer and more intense than ours?" (132). Could Kinbote be an illustration of the Zemblan proverb, "*the lost glove*" who "*is happy*" (17)?

If the novel leads readers to that question, it certainly doesn't leave them with an answer--especially considering the indeterminacy of Kinbote's final words in the Commentary: "History permitting, I may sail back to my recovered kingdom . . . I may huddle and groan in a madhouse. But whatever happens, wherever the scene is laid, somebody, somewhere . . . will ring at my door--a bigger, more respectable, more competent Gradus" (301). Kinbote ends by pointing to his own death and by recalling Shade's murder and the ultimate figure of abjection--the human body devoid of life, the literalization of all that is finally "not-me."

In "Watermark: Writing the Self in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*," Patrick O'Donnell discusses the novel's dual themes of both the desires and the limitations of selfhood: "The larger purposes of Nabokov's hermeneutic parody" are "to discover the limits of the self conceived in language, as well as its constructive possibilities" (384). O'Donnell uses the language of abjection and "dethroned" subjects as he explains that "All of *Pale Fire* speaks of its own supplementarity in this regard: it is an inscription of the yearning for lost kingdoms and the manifestations of divinity, a realization of their absence, and a translation of this loss into a system of signs which marks the history of the self's desire" (392). In his fantasy of kingship, Kinbote reflects the subconscious desire of every human subject to be fully loved by and in control of its kingdom. Yet, self-consciousness occurs in the realm of language, and involves the pain of separation and the distance between subject and object. O'Donnell explains:

> Miraculous as this world may be, it only comes about through "warp," defamiliarization, and the pain of exile. . . . So the world reflects Kinbote and the pain of his being which, perhaps fancifully, is the pain of textuality--an inscription that inevitably commemorates the mortality of words and worlds. . . . For Nabokov, in *Pale Fire*, the self is textual and mortal: an entity who comes into being by establishing its relation to the elements of the language in which it is born, through which it is identified, to which it dies. His novel is ultimately a celebration of our legibility, our being readable within the confinements of language. (404-05)

Loss is the prerequisite for selfhood and language, both of which are bounded by death. Translation and communication between self and other are made possible by these losses. O'Donnell thus highlights the relationship, in *Pale Fire*, between abjection and textuality itself.

In human efforts to negotiate love towards an object, language is the required bridge across the moat of the castled self. In the first review of *Pale Fire*, Mary McCarthy describes the misfit characters of the novel in terms which prefigure the theory of abjection:

> [Nabokov's] fond, wry compassion for the lone black piece on the board goes deeper than classificatory science or the collector's choplicking. Love is the burden of *Pale Fire*, love and loss. Love is felt as a kind of homesickness, that yearning for union described by Plato, the pining for the other half of a once-whole body, the straining of the soul's black horse to unite with the white. The sense of loss in love, of separation (the room

> *beyond*, projected onto the snow, the phantom moves of the chess knight, that deviate piece, *off* the board's edge onto ghostly squares), binds mortal men in a common pattern. (Page 135)

McCarthy suggests that perhaps for Nabokov, all human subjects are knights on a chess board, unable to move directly towards a beloved, awkwardly jumping in L-shapes that seek to unite with figures who are equally bound by the rules of subjective movement. McCarthy's conclusion recalls the abject state of human existence itself: "In the game of signaling back and forth with mirrors, which may be man's relation with the cosmos, there is perhaps no before or after, only distance--separation--and, across it, the agitated flashing of the semaphore" (Page 136). Forever separate from the physical and psychological boundedness of others, and perhaps divided also from full knowledge of ourselves, McCarthy's metaphor of mirroring is especially appropriate if the self is understood as dependent on this identification.

Hazel is unable to emerge from a childish state of abjection; Gradus falls into a state of abject criminality after a failed marriage; and Kinbote hovers in a double state of abjection that is enforced both by the exclusion of others and by his attempt to reread himself in Shade's text. I believe the abjection present in the characters of *Pale Fire* matters because it is a reflection of the struggles, failures, misreadings, and exclusions that all people, as human subjects, are subjected to encounter. Despite Kinbote's mental illness, he at least remains the character who is alive and able to function as an interpreter of other texts.[20] His circumstances certainly provide enough motivation for him to turn

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[20] Some critics, following Nabokov's interview discussing *Pale Fire*, comment that Kinbote "'certainly' committed suicide" and refer to the character as if he were already dead. I agree with Michael Wood,

abjection into dejection and to commit suicide as Hazel and Gradus do. In his unfulfilled desire, in his abject need for others to confirm who he is, Kinbote projects himself into Shade's text when clearly there is virtually no trace of him there. His misreading is a reminder of Shade's words: "Resemblances are the shadows of differences" (265). As Stewart points out, "We become aware, as in fact does Kinbote in some of his clearer moments, that no matter how many correspondences we can draw between two systems, they remain more different than alike" (238-39). No matter how abject a subject, it can never merge with its object of desire.

In its use of abjection, Nabokov's novel challenges our ability to read other people as well as our motivations for doing so. Kinbote's failure is one we can laugh at but one we are also meant to understand. Not only can we see, as Rampton writes, "how successfully Nabokov has arranged for the critic to see his own foolish face in one of *Pale Fire*'s mirrors" (*Critical* 160), but we can see how all humans are reflected in the image of Kinbote's madness. Human subjects want to see their image reflected in the texts of others' eyes, want to see themselves as the rulers of the kingdom whose loss forever haunts them--that royal throne of pre-subjective infancy.

Nabokov's fiction comprises a catalog of disordered selves. In presenting this odd variety of literary *subjects*, he is playing with questions of selfhood and with the twentieth century's debate about whether *all* of us are playing at being a self all the time. His portraits of abject characters frequently are humorous, but this humor is dark. It circles the question "what if?" What if the self is no more than a construction? What if

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however, in calling this "authorial trespassing" that we have no obligation "to pay attention to" (186). At the end of the novel, Kinbote remains alive.

underneath the self's mask there is nothing? Can people cohere if they do not believe in them*selves*? Can novelists write texts that cohere? Like his modernist predecessors of iconoclastic fiction, Nabokov bends the boundaries of the novel as he tests the flexibility of self. The metafictionists who follow in his path--with their alinear, genre-mixing, "abject" texts--continue to tease out (and tease about) implications of the self when it is viewed as fundamentally determined, fluid, or unknowable.

"It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. . . . The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience." Julia Kristeva

CHAPTER FOUR

Postmodern Abjection: The Media-ted Self in DeLillo

While Nabokov bridges modernism and postmodernism and is a pioneer in submitting his characters to philosophical games of selfhood, Don DeLillo is known primarily as a postmodern writer. As such, he often emphasizes the plight of characters whose selfhood is threatened or killed by culture. Like Nabokov, DeLillo walks a tightrope between parody and metaphysical inquiry. His quirky characters and their often bizarre narrative observations push against the boundary of what is accepted as "serious" verisimilitude and what might appear as only abject cartooning of the self. Again like Nabokov, however, DeLillo uses abjection to show that selves seek identification with *something* (if not someone). DeLillo's fiction suggests that the self exists even if postmodern society works to frustrate its existence. The uneasy experience of abjection is a good thing for DeLillo, a signal that a character retains *self*-consciousness amidst all the culture's complications and challenges to subjectivity. Characters who seem to express no uncomfortable awareness of themselves, on the other hand, are the ones to whom the narrators seem to direct their implicit criticism. Abjection in these works is a sign that characters have not allowed a consumer-driven postmodern environment to damage their subjectivity.

The self's fate in postmodern culture has been recognized as a recurring issue in DeLillo's fiction. Joseph Walker suggests that "The DeLillo character . . . is a matrix, a

simulation of a whole and coherent self" (460). Ted Billy comments on the power of capitalism to change consumers' idea of selfhood. In a media-filled society, people devote so much attention to their outside image that they neglect any part of themselves that is not readily visible. As Billy puts it, "By focusing on how Americans slavishly endeavor to enhance their extrinsic selves to reflect their real or imagined prestige, [DeLillo] foregrounds the atrophy of the intrinsic self in a materialistic culture that values only tangible signs of success" (270). Billy claims that DeLillo "updates the perennial problem of defining the self. (Is selfhood a physical entity, a spiritual entity, or a combination of both?)" (282). By answering that "In Jack's superfluous society an intangible self is a negligible self" (282), Billy suggests that independent selfhood may have become outdated in the world inhabited by DeLillo's characters. Similarly, for Eugene Goodheart, "the very presence or absence of self is one of the themes of DeLillo's fiction" (355).

DeLillo is also known for capturing the dynamics of postmodern spaces--shopping centers, ballparks, grocery stores, rock concerts, political gatherings. Describing how such spaces affect individuals in DeLillo's work, Laura Barrett writes, "Exemplified by the urban spaces in which these characters move and by the images that constantly assault them, . . . [m]irrored buildings, repetitive art, and familiar advertisements all conspire to deprive humans of solid identities, suggesting that postmodern art forms are the catalysts for the slippage of personality" (790). Barrett's analysis applies well to the postmodern environments featured in many of DeLillo's novels. According to many theorists, these spaces have a subsequent effect of one's experience of self. As Joseph Hopper writes, "[D]ifferent selves emerge that continually

shape and are shaped by the interactions and practical activities of each location. This is the crux of what some describe as the postmodern condition: multiplying sites of interaction create multiple selves; we shift rapidly from one to another and in doing so we become agglomerations of many different selves" (127).

Other studies describe DeLillo's portrayal of the "normal," non-famous citizen in a system venerating fame and celebrity. For example, Jeremy Green writes that in DeLillo's work, "Advertising, movies, and television promise that one might become 'somebody,' a public figure; DeLillo's characters find that these promises in fact have the effect of making one into nobody in particular, the anonymous double of an identity always possessed by one who is structurally other" (580-81). In other words, by wanting to stand out and become noticeable, Americans may pattern themselves after a celebrity and thus ironically take on the image of a copied self who is less individual, less distinctive. In fact, many critics agree that the postmodern worship of fame and consumerism amounts to a virtual suicide of the self in current America culture. As Billy puts it, "Just as Narcissus met his fate by falling into his own reflection, DeLillo dramatizes America's fall into a specious spectacle: the national love affair with extraneous reflections to our own acquisitiveness and possessiveness. By externalizing personal identity, we plunge headfirst into a shallow pool" (282-83). Not content to be ordinary or plain in such a televised world, consumers seek identification in the deceptive mirrors of the mall, the ATM machine, or the mass media.

Not everyone supports DeLillo's perspective on postmodern psychology, however. In his article "Don DeLillo's America," Bruce Bawer criticizes him for continually harping on the issue of damaged American selfhood:

> Most of Don DeLillo's novels are born out of a preoccupation with a single theme: namely, that contemporary American society is the worst enemy that the cause of human individuality and self-realization has ever had. In one semi-surrealist opus after another, DeLillo has told the story of a conspicuously successful American who jumps off the assembly line. (21)

For Bawer, the ever-present issue of selfhood in DeLillo's work is a fault that reduces the author's repertoire to one overplayed idea. He goes on to say that "If anyone is guilty of turning modern Americans into Xerox copies, it is Don DeLillo" (28).

What Bawer fails to address, however, are the perceptive characters--sometimes the narrators--who retain their subjectivity and describe those who have not with an amused or frightened tone of concern. Bucky Wunderlick in *Great Jones Street* and Jack Gladney in *White Noise* are two prime examples of central characters who seem aware that postmodern society offers a host of empty sources of identification which have the ability to produce people with equally empty conceptions of who they are. Furthermore, novels like *Running Dog* and *Libra* which seem to illustrate postmodernity's potential damage to the self do not necessarily suggest that these negative characters have no selfhood whatsoever. Mark Osteen writes that "in a sense *Running Dog* really has no characters, but only bundles of gestures, voices, and desires, radial matrixes of conflicting motives and forces" (144). As an author, however, DeLillo is counting on real selves, his readers, to understand the ironic distance he maintains between himself and his creation. Osteen makes an insightful point as he explains, "Precisely because the characters in *Running Dog* are so two-dimensional, the reader strives to give them depth, instinctively

understanding that the mysteries of subjectivity extend beneath and beyond the tentacles of capitalist representations" (153). Characters least aware of their abjection in DeLillo's work--and, in my formulation, those deficient in subjectivity--are ironically often the most *abject*, cast out of their psychological skin and thrown into the facsimile machine of postmodern culture. The rare individuals who *have* maintained a sense of self in DeLillo's fiction, on the other hand, seem to be the most honest in evaluating the necessarily abject dimensions of human experience.

Differences between modern and postmodern conceptions of *self* and *subject* are as complex and varied as the distinctions between what defines modernist from postmodernist society and modernism from postmodernism as artistic movements. A full discussion of these terms and their implications for selfhood are beyond the scope of this project. Many oversimplified analyses present the modernist self as solid and unquestioned as opposed to the postmodernist self which, fragmented beyond recognition, is declared dead.[1] Such accounts ignore the reality of modernist philosophies

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[1] In their book *Institutional Selves: Troubled Identities in a Postmodern World*, Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein reflect a common, if oversimplified, understanding of what happens to the self in postmodernism. They explain that taking the existence of the *self* as a given in the late twentieth century is no longer possible: "Today, according to some postmodern voices, the self doesn't amount to much at all anymore; the story of the self has come to an end" (v). They give the following distinction between a modern and postmodern conception of self:

> In a *modern* context, while the personal self is viewed as socially influenced, it also is believed to have its own private location separate from society, a space centered in personal experience. . . . In a world understood in *postmodern* terms, however, the relationship between the personal self and society dramatically changes. The social self moves to the foreground, as the personal self is decentered from itself and recentered into myriad going concerns. (10)

Using a more biological approach but reaching similar results in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argue that socialization processes give individuals a subjective perception of reality. The concepts of "here" and "now" for one person are shaped uniquely to his or her phenomenological situation. They believe primary and secondary socialization outweigh whatever is unique to an individual (an "organism"): "In the dialectic between nature and the socially constructed world the human organism itself is transformed. In this same dialectic man produces reality

and social changes which were already calling the Cartesian self into question and positioning the subject in new ways. Postmodernist thought is similarly misrepresented by easy dichotomies when a belief in the non-existence of self supported by poststructuralism is attributed to all postmodern thinking.

Fredric Jameson addresses this issue in "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." According to Jameson, "[O]ne of the more fashionable themes in contemporary theory, [is] that of the 'death' of the subject itself--the end of autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual--and the accompanying stress, whether as some new moral ideal or as empirical description, on the *decentering* of that formerly centered subject or psyche" (318). He then makes an important distinction between two main lines of theorizing the self within postmodern philosophy: "the historicist" model which believes "that a once-existing centered subject, in the period of classical capitalism and the nuclear family, has today in the world of organizational bureaucracy dissolved," and "the more radical poststructuralist position" which argues that "such a subject never existed in the first place but constituted something like an ideological mirage" (318-19). While Jameson's three-part structure is more helpful than the dichotomized view of the modern versus postmodern self, even he simplifies the issue for the sake of his larger argument.

One thorough treatment of twentieth-century views of subjectivity and identity is Robert Dunn's *Identity Crises*. Acknowledging the complex rise of individualism that began prior to and continued during modernism, Dunn explains that the self began to receive a great deal of attention during modernism because it was viewed as a

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and thereby produces himself" (183). The existential *self* is not an entity here but is instead reduced to a matrix of biology and sociology programmed into a receptive unit.

psychological refuge from the rapidly changing modernist landscape: "The estrangement thematized by the discourses of alienation presupposed an inner life separate from or opposed to the society outside as well as ideals of unity and connectedness to others through which this inner life might achieve some structure and fulfillment" (64). Rather than being understood as entering into an entirely new paradigm, then, the theorized self of postmodern philosophy may be viewed as experiencing an intensification of a problematizing that already was in progress during the century. Postmodernism brings an increased urgency to and multiplication of the potentials threats to selfhood. As Dunn writes, "While modernity places great strains on self-conception by expanding and differentiating the field of social relations," in postmodernity "the technological and semiotic environment of consumerism invades, absorbs, fractures, and reconstitutes this field in ways that throw self-conception into question" (80). Postmodern consumers are faced with more products, more images, more potential connection to others through technology--all of which offers different depths and degrees of potential identification with other selves.

An early DeLillo novel such as *Running Dog* illustrates the self as often conceived by postmodernism. Published in 1970, the book combines many themes he will take up later in his career: government conspiracy, networks of crime, and America's fascination with film. Hidden identity and secret alliances generate the plot. In the prologue, two police officers discover a man dressed as a woman who has just been shot: "These days, what is it? Everybody's in disguise," one officer says to the other (8). Readers soon learn that the murder occurred for the sake of a supposed underground Nazi pornography tape, filmed literally underground during the fall of Germany. Moll

Robbins, a reporter for *Running Dog* magazine, ends up joining the hunt when she becomes involved with various Washington, D.C. men either bidding for the film or trailing those who seek it. In Mark Osteen's analysis, "the novel's questers serve an amoral, fetishistic, fascistic capitalism that turns humans into objects or 'running dogs'" (135). The characters' empty selfhood is mirrored in their empty search. It does not even matter what generates their quest; the point is that acquiring this object has become their only motivation.

Ubiquitous falsehood and the flimsiness of selfhood soon become primary themes of the novel. Pornography trader Richie Armbrister says to the collector Lightborne, "They'll never find me. I have too much paper floating around. I'm very well hidden, believe me. Holding companies in four states. Dummy corporations. I don't exist as a person. I'm not in writing anywhere" (49-50). Senator Lloyd Percival (whose hidden erotica collection Moll ends up discovering) accuses a Capitol Hill moderator of being "all image. . . . He's a bunch of little electronic dots, that's all he is" (31). But Percival himself recognizes how thoroughly his own identity is tied to his career and later says to a woman at a party, "Would you recognize me as Lloyd Percival if you saw me in a beard? Dark glasses, say, and a beard. If you saw me in an unlikely place. . . . Far from the splendor of Capitol Hill" (200). These are self-aware characters who realize that their place in society is secured merely by their playing the appropriate role, dressed in the appropriate costume.[2]

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[2] DeLillo's characters in *Running Dog* seem aware of Erving Goffman's thesis in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* that every person is an actor and human identity a full-time part one plays. As Goffman argues, "To *be* a given kind of person, then, is not merely to possess the required attributes, but also to sustain the standards of conduct and appearance that one's social grouping attaches thereto. . . . A status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of

It is no accident that one of *Running Dog*'s main characters is named Glen Selvy. Ironically, Selvy is the person who has the most atrophied, deadened sense of self in the book. In contrast to DeLillo's characters in later novels--those who will be suffocating beneath heaps of unnecessary possessions--Selvy lives in a "severely underfurnished" apartment (24). The narrator explains, "This quality of transience appealed to Selvy. It had the advantage of reducing one's accountability, somehow. If you were always ten minutes from departure, you couldn't be expected to answer to the same moderating precepts other people followed" (24). Selvy's non-descript but mysterious government job encourages him in this attitude:

> [Selvy] lived in the off-hours. He created his own operational environment, having little outside direction, no sense of policy. Periodically he reported to a house near the Government Printing Office, where he was given a technical interview, or polygraph, or lie detector test. He was a reader. He read his man. There was nothing cynical in his view of the world. He didn't feel tainted by the dirt of his profession. It was a calculated existence, this. He preferred life narrowed down to

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appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated" (75). Furthermore, Goffman's conclusion, like Berger and Luckmann's, is also that the *self* is a social construction:

> In this report the performed self was seen as some kind of image, usually creditable, which the individual on stage and in character effectively attempts to induce others to hold in regard to him. While this image is entertained *concerning* the individual, so that a self is imputed to him, this self itself does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses. A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation--this self--is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (252-53)

> unfinished rooms. (54)

Selvy's entire identity is derived from this role. The opposite of a subject recognizing another in relationship, as a "reader" he is trained in knowing his targets on the surface, anonymously, only in order to kill them. Relevant to Selvy's warped subjectivity is Gilles Deleuze's analysis of the Marquis de Sade's perverse treatment of others:

> [P]erversion is nothing without the presence of the Other. . . . But from the point of view of the structure, the contrary must be asserted: it is because the structure-Other is missing, and is replaced by a completely different structure, that the real "Others" are no longer able to play the role of terms actualizing the lost primary structure. Real "Others" can only play now, in the second structure, the role of bodies-victims . . . or the role of accomplices-doubles, and accomplices-elements. (*Reader* 67)

Relating to others only as agents who give him orders by phone or as targets he is ordered to kill, Selvy is not shown to participate in any legitimate human relationships. His perversity as a subject, however, is not necessarily caused by postmodern society, as Deleuze's comparison to a man centuries earlier reveals. Postmodern conditions simply direct the expression of his perversity.

Like Oswald in *Libra*, guns make Selvy happy. For him, as machines that enable control over other human beings, "guns and their parts amounted to an inventory of personal worth. He controlled the weapon, his reflexes and judgment. Maintaining the parts and knowing the gun's special characteristics were ways of demonstrating involvement in his own well-being" (82). He thus loves firearms and apparently acquired an intimate knowledge of them from a mysterious military/terrorist camp in the

southwest. When he is not working, Selvy's hobby is to spend time at the shooting range, working "on stance, breath control, eye focus. The idea was to build almost a second self. Someone smarter and more detached" (83). Even after an assassin attempts to shoot him and barely misses, Selvy simply analyzes what was wrong with the man's posture and technique, showing no concern that he could have been killed.

DeLillo repeatedly associates Glen Selvy's self with his weapons and demonstrates how the character treats his own body as a machine-like object, like the guns of which he is so fond. Selvy's rules for life are brief, streamlined for efficiency: "Shaving was an emblem of rigor, the severity of the double life. Shaving. Proper maintenance of old combat gear. Seats on the aisle in planes and trains. Sex with married women only. These were personal quirks mostly, aspects of his psychic guide to survival" (81). Furthermore, as Osteen notes, Selvy often "refers to himself in second person, thereby betraying a deep self-alienation: a mechanism nearly as mindless as his weapons, Selvy has no self beyond his scripted rituals" (137). Like Smurov and Hermann's division in their own self-perception, Selvy reveals his split subjectivity by referring to himself with odd linguistic distance. Like Luzhin's robotic behavior when viewing himself as a chess piece, Selvy's "scripted rituals" save him from the complications of being a person whose daily action is based on personal decisions.

DeLillo puts Selvy and Moll together, in a flat farce of a love story that is frightening in its mechanics of sex and absence of human warmth. Moll is smart enough to recognize what she is getting into. Early on, she says to him "Or are you the kind of person who sees himself as a man without a history--no past, no relatives, no ties, no binds. You're the kind of person who sees himself as a man without a history" (63).

Selvy is quick to remind her, however, "But you like that kind of person" (63), and Moll does not disagree. In some ways, they are not a bad match.

Living a reporter's life, Moll also keeps herself relatively free of possessions. She tells Selvy, "Transience and flash. Story of my life. I realize looking around this place that I don't have any furniture in the strict sense. I stack clothes in those modular boxes in the bedroom. I work at a folding table. I have a wall unit. It's just as well, isn't it? If you don't live in a house on your own piece of property, there's no point owning real things" (109). DeLillo makes it clear, however, that Moll is closer to having a functional self than Selvy. Moll, perhaps, exemplifies the best possible accommodation to postmodern life. A women's liberationist of the 70s doing her job to the best of her ability, she refuses the advances of Percival and Earl Mudger even though each of them could give her information she is seeking. In the end Moll is seemingly rewarded for sticking to her principles: she and Lightborne are the only ones who see the supposed Hitler pornography film (which turns out to be nothing but poorly made home movies of some unidentified children belonging to high-ranking Nazis).

At the same time, Moll seems genuinely disappointed that her affair with Selvy does not turn into anything more substantial. When she asks him "Who are you, Selvy?" not only does he not reply, but, as the narrator explains, "He appeared to be disassociating himself from whatever significance the question by its nature ascribed to him" (110). Selvy does not even think of himself in the category of "who." After his encounters with Moll, Selvy notices that he has broken his rule about having affairs only with married women. He also has an unusually self-reflective thought: "It occurred to Selvy he hadn't been hungry in years. He'd experienced weakness and discomfort from

lack of food. But he hadn't desired it really, except to ease the discomfort. He tried to recall the last time he'd felt a real desire for food" (125). Selvy's memory of hunger here is a call back to bodily experience and further proof of the distance from desire, from abject subjectivity, that he typically maintains. Although he does show hints of humanity as the novel progresses, he still puts an end to his affair with Moll and becomes further enmeshed in the chase for the Hitler film. Earl Mudger's men eventually track Selvy down and kill him. The killer decapitates him because "He thought Earl would want to have it. Evidence that the adjustment had been made" (240). Fittingly, Selvy's murder is considered merely an "adjustment" by the man who kills him. DeLillo allows the character to die in the same manner that he lived--as a depersonalized object. Osteen makes a similar point: "Selvy's maiming is ironically appropriate: a man who has closed off the possibility of choice and made himself into a subject for observation and manipulation, his final destiny is to become a pornographic artifact, an emblem of *Running Dog's* other fractured subjects" (147). *Subject to* various postmodern systems, Selvy appears to have no subjectivity, no self-consciousness, of his own.

Discussing *Running Dog* in an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo says, "What I was really getting at . . . was a sense of the terrible acquisitiveness in which we live, coupled with a final indifference to the object. After all the mad attempts to acquire the thing, everyone suddenly decides that, well, maybe we really don't care about this so much anyway" (302). That is, the Hitler tape becomes merely a signifier representing the thing--any *thing*--humans use in an attempt to displace their identity onto the next available object. The chase for a coveted item is then subtly linked to the deeper question of why all these characters are so willing to chase anything to such an extent. What lack

in them propelled such a time- and energy-consuming search for something that turns out to be a worthless bust, anyway? Bill Mullen makes a point that is relevant here: "The second plot complements the first by presenting Selvy ('selfish') as the self who resists deviation by sticking exclusively to his military 'routine.'. . . Yet this 'self-repression' is only the most extreme version of that which plagues all the characters in the novel" (132-33). These government and mafia characters are willing to join the chase for the pornography tape because they are either obsessed with collecting erotica/pornography or devoted to pursuing time-consuming and illegal secrets--both of which are enterprises that allow people literally to forget about themselves. As Osteen points out, "Mudger's organization thus mirrors the porn industry: both are bureaucracies devoted to the arrangement, manipulation, reorganization, regulation, and management of bodies by means of social categories. That is, Mudger exercises power by controlling representations of selfhood" (142). Furthermore, Mudger and the other characters with secret alliances all represent the larger forces determining (and denying) selfhood in late-capitalist culture. Selvy, in particular, is a disturbingly self-less character who prefers existing as if he is a machine, outside of relationship, devoid of emotion.

Eighteen years later, in *Libra*, DeLillo takes up a plot very similar to that of *Running Dog*. As Christopher Mott explains, "DeLillo's treatment of the main characters in *Libra* seems to grow out of his earlier explorations of characters and subjectivity, especially as subjectivity comes to mean a subject position within an interpellative ideology. In *Running Dog* and *The Names*, DeLillo investigated the government institutions that carry out such interpellations and maintain the ideologies that position subjects" (132). The true "story" and potential stories surrounding the assassination of

John F. Kennedy give DeLillo the perfect backdrop in *Libra* for exploring the balance between a human self's decisions and social conditioning. Aligning himself with the theories of government conspiracy in Kennedy's shooting, DeLillo creates a paradoxical character in Oswald--a man who both is and is not himself. In Mott's analysis, "Oswald's beliefs, his desires, and dreams are all 'scripted'; they all exist as texts. . . . There is no difference between a scripted Oswald and the 'real thing'" (138). Similarly, Thomas Carmichael writes that Oswald "can be read as paradigmatic of the situation of postmodern subjectivity" (211). To an exaggerated and alarming extent, Oswald represents someone whose degree of being *subject to* the system is uncertain but who still believes he is actively willing his choices as the prototypical American individual.

Not surprisingly, critics have recognized the troubled relationship between self and the postmodern world as an important theme of *Libra*. Mott believes this is one of DeLillo's primary projects in the novel: "Oswald clearly stands as an example of postmodern subjectivity, a subjectivity without a transcendent self beneath the 'false' layers of social conditioning. . . . Oswald exists in the third person; he exists in a subject position that precedes and lives beyond him" (139). Speaking to Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo confirms this intention for the novel. When DeCurtis says "It's almost as if Oswald embodied a postmodern notion of character in which the self isn't fixed and you assume or discard traits as the mood strikes you," DeLillo replies, "Someone who knew Oswald referred to him as an actor in real life, and I do think there is a sense in which he was watching himself perform" (289). William Cain also emphasizes this theatrical dimension of the character: "Even when Oswald sojourns in his fantasies about how he might become integrated with history, he remains dissociated from the scenes he

imagines: he sees himself seen. He believes that his acts will be significant and his life made real only when onlookers legitimate them. What he does will matter only when his dramatic performance is witnessed" (62). Like Kate Croy and Charlotte Stant, Oswald is dependent on an audience. But the potential theater of his performance is widely expanded by conditions of postmodern society. Desiring to be televised and ultimately flattened into a recyclable image, Oswald illustrates the media's pull toward utter abjection, toward the tempting of a person to throw away, at least largely neglect, his interior self.

In *Libra*, Oswald is continually presented as a marginal figure, isolated from his closest family and friends. A social worker's report of him as a child states that "he feels almost as if there is a veil between him and other people through which they cannot reach him, but he prefers this veil to remain intact" (12). The narrator later describes Oswald's distance from others: "These were important things, family, money, the past, but they did not touch his real life, the inward-spinning self . . . . He liked his brother but was certain Robert didn't know who he was" (37). While stationed in Tokyo with the Marines, Oswald continues to reflect on his isolation, even in the midst of his unit and supposed friends: "He was not connected to anything here and not quite connected to himself and he spoke less to Konno than to the person Konno would report to, someone out there, in the floating world, a collector of loose talk" (89). Like some of Nabokov's characters, Oswald also begins to experience himself from a distance, feeling as if he is not a person acting but is a viewer merely watching his bodily self perform with others who are equally vague: "He barely noticed himself talking. That was the interesting part. The more he spoke, the more he felt he was softly split in two. It was all so remote he didn't

think it mattered what he said. He never even looked at his companion. He sat in a white calm and let the sentences float" (90). As a child and then as a young adult in the Marines, Oswald never seems at one with his subjectivity and often expresses regret that others do not or cannot understand his significance.

Fittingly, what Oswald likes most about the military is poring over his Marine Corps manual. Directions for constructing his identity appear to be inside it. After shooting himself to avoid being sent to the Philippines, he ends up in a military prison telling his cell mate, Dupard, that what the Marine manual really explains is "How to be a tool of the system. A workable part. It's the perfect capitalist handbook" (106). DeLillo's words here emphasize the character's awareness that what the military most wants is to squash and then to reform/re-form its soldiers' identity:

> The trick inside the wire was to stay within your own zone, avoid eye contact, accidental touch, gestures of certain types, anything that might hint at a personality behind the drone unit. The only safety was in facelessness. . . . They'd built the brig just to keep it clean. It was where they put their white lines. Everything depended on the lines. The brig was the place where all the lines that were painted in the military mind were made bright and clean forever. Once he understood that, he knew he had their number. (108)

These relentless, tautological tasks and routines emphasize the complete subjection of Oswald's will--and the elimination of his self--to the larger organization of the Marines and, by extension, to the U.S. government. Oswald's deeper understanding of military procedure parallels his deeper understanding of America and the process of becoming a

self under capitalism.

One much-noted theme in *Libra* is the importance, for Oswald, of merging his *self* with history. Cain writes that Oswald becomes the "thematic center for the study of the American self and its effort to find a home in history" (277). Leonard Wilcox sees Oswald as "a figure devoted to media self-fashioning" who "constructs his life--and indeed his death--from the proliferation of charismatic images and spectacles of a postmodern society" (97). And Arnold Weinstein reads the plot as the nightmarish unwinding of the traditional American, self-made man: "The shapers are in the system, and the central conceit of DeLillo's book is the *making of a man*, not by self-determination but by paste and glue. An entire American tradition of self-making . . . is now biting the dust" (147). The transformation of the person Lee Oswald to the personality Lee Harvey Oswald thus demonstrates, to an exaggerated and pathological extent, the process of becoming an American self who will be distinctive and remembered, even if despised. It is ironic, however, that this tradition of making a name for one's self in America merges, in Oswald's case, with his indoctrination into Marxist theory. As he studies Communist writers, Oswald thinks,

> Maybe what has to happen is that the individual must allow himself to be swept along, must find himself in the stream of no-choice, the single direction. . . . The purpose of history is to climb out of your own skin. He knew what Trotsky had written, that revolution leads us out of the dark night of the isolated self. We live forever in history, outside ego and id. (101)

Oddly enough, in wanting to become the ideal Marxist, Oswald makes himself into the

ideal tool precisely in the manner that capitalism prescribes. His desire for fame is so great that he is willing to do anything to "purchase" it, even if the cost is committing murder. His desire is marketable, as well, to buyers who easily see how to convert it to their gain.

Oswald's fascination with Communist theory is driven by his deep fear that he is "no one" in America. Ashamed of his family background and class level, he hides himself in the military, lives in Russia for a time, and absorbs himself in Marxist writings. His insight into capitalist dynamics is foreshadowed early on. Oswald tells his brother Robert, "they're always trying to sell you something. Everything is based on forcing people to buy. If you can't buy what they're selling, you're a zero in the system" (40). Later, his Marxist books convince him that "he was the product of a sweeping history, he and his mother, locked into a process, a system of money and property that diminished their human worth every day, as if by scientific law" (41). Oswald's first job teaches him that "the less important you are in an office, the more they expect the happy smile" (42). And getting to see John Wayne live while stationed in Japan, Oswald is deeply impressed with the celebrity's power: "He watches John Wayne talk and laugh. It's remarkable and startling to see the screen laugh repeated in life. It makes him feel good. The man is doubly real. He does not cheat or disappoint" (93). One of Oswald's failings is this inaccurate formula for gauging the reality of a self. After appearing as image on film, the "real," physical John Wayne carries an aura that Oswald envies. Fame, he learns, is the final piece of American success. Even while he disapproves of capitalism and becomes more devoted to Marxist theories, Oswald is clearly influenced by the consumer and fame-driven dynamics of the "self" available for purchase in

America.

In fact, DeLillo portrays this dissatisfaction with one's self produced by a media-saturated society as the source of Oswald's emotional breakdown while in Russia. In the mental institution there, Oswald thinks that he is missing the secret to greatness that everyone else seems to possess:

> It was this blankness that caused his terror. No one could distinguish him from anyone else. There was some trick he hadn't mastered which might easily set things right. Other people knew what it was; he did not. Other people got along; he could not. . . . He'd made plans, he'd engineered a new life, and now no one would take ten minutes to understand who he was. A zero in the system. (151)

This last phrase becomes a repeated refrain in the novel. Oswald is "a zero in the system" because, even while in Russia, he carries the American media's false criteria for self-making with him. He realizes he does not count for anything in a capitalist economy. He thus becomes a perfect candidate for playing sitting duck in a CIA conspiracy.

As the government plotters create an identity for their planned Kennedy assassin, *Libra* illustrates the postmodern idea that a self is a constructed fiction. The plot that will come to define Oswald is foreshadowed when Win Everett says to fellow CIA member Larry Parmenter, "We do the whole thing with paper. Passports, drivers' licenses, address books. Our team of shooters disappears but the police find a trail. Mail-order forms, change-of-address cards, photographs. We script a person or persons out of ordinary pocket litter" (28). Everett and his co-conspirators later add to their fall guy

recipe, as Everett thinks, "Create a loneliness that beats with violent desire. This kind of man. An arrest, a false name, a stolen credit card. Stalking a victim can be a way of organizing one's loneliness. . . . Desperate men give their solitude a purpose and a destiny" (147). Meanwhile DeLillo depicts Oswald during his stay in Russia, where a Moscow health official notes, "One thing the tests confirmed. This was not agent material. You want self-command and mettle, a steadiness of will. This boy played Ping-Pong in his head" (167).

While Oswald is not "agent material" either for the Communists or for the U.S. military, DeLillo portrays him as the quintessential unstable subject, searching for recognition, waiting for a supposedly grand role in history to construct him. Oswald knew that "Once you did something notorious, they tagged you with an extra name, a middle name that was ordinarily never used. You were officially marked, a chapter in the imagination of the state" (198). He is also astute enough to observe that a government building in Washington, D.C., "had two entrances, two addresses. One for who you are, one for who you say you are" (312). Oswald wants to conceal his neglected self with an image, his own aura that would make him extraordinary. He wants to use the unmarked entrances of American buildings. Since he believes he is only a "zero in the system," he is more than willing to let the system turn him into whomever it would like him to be. Sitting at a bar with Captain Ferrie, the ex-military man who will supply him with weapons, Oswald notices others like him, existing on the margins of society. He seems to feel a kinship with the abject, those "with a look about them of chronic absenteeism, some failure to cohere--exiles, cargo handlers, seamen without papers, half a dozen amorphous others" (313-14). As he continues to drink with Ferrie, Oswald's sense of

inebriation again mirrors his loose sense of self: "Lee felt his smile floating in the air about six inches from his face" (315). Here the narrator portrays him as almost literally beside himself. This moment is not one of abject uneasiness, however, but one of drunken delusion where Oswald naively thinks that he is finally about to become *someone* by committing a pre-scripted crime.

Following his arrest, Oswald hears himself featured in media reports and feels strangely disconnected from them: "he heard his name on the radios and TVs. Lee Harvey Oswald. It sounded extremely strange. He didn't recognize himself in the full intonation of the name. . . . It sounded odd and dumb and made up. They were talking about somebody else" (416). However, he also feels a deep sense of satisfaction in finally achieving success in America, despite the way this success is found through committing a crime: "His life had a single clear subject now, called Lee Harvey Oswald. He and Kennedy were partners. The figure of the gunman in the window was inextricable from the victim and his history. This sustained Oswald in his cell. It gave him what he needed to live" (435).[3] DeLillo ends that plot line by focusing on how Oswald's televised image remains the most remembered one of him and perhaps also the most troubling. As Beryl Parmenter watches TV replays of Oswald's own assassination by Jack Ruby, she notices

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[3] William Cain offers a helpful analysis of Oswald's psychology here: "The introverted, formerly forsaken Oswald has identified himself as historic. . . . He is eternally wedded to the wealthy, attractive, beloved President . . . and can now legitimately classify and brood upon his motives and acts for they are stunningly significant to everybody" (68). Cain also draws conclusions about DeLillo's conception of self in *Libra*: "DeLillo portrays life in this book as a hypnotic transaction between selves that crave success and media that promise a lustrous place in history. This, he suggests, is what it means for a person to gain contact with himself and acquire the resolve needed to endure life in a small room"--or prison cell, in this case (68). Furthermore, Cain says, "Selves are facts and fictions, and are doubled with and crossed by other selves. A self, it seems, is disputed territory and a site where intelligence performs its work intensively but, in this

> something in Oswald's face, a glance at the camera before he was shot, that put him here in the audience, among the rest of us . . . [,] a way of telling us that he knows who we are and how we feel, that he has brought our perceptions and interpretations into his sense of the crime. Something in the look . . . tells us that he is outside the moment, watching with the rest of us. (447)

Something in Oswald's glance, the flat look, empty of self-consciousness, leads Beryl into a profound moment of her own abjection. The narrator captures both the fascination and the horror of her strange sense of identification with this criminal. This discomfort Beryl experiences is a positive sign of her own selfhood, a recognition that Oswald is lacking some dimension of humanity. As Kristeva writes, "uncanniness maintains that share of unease that leads the self, beyond anguish, toward depersonalization. . . . [A]n elimination of the strange could lead to an elimination of the psyche, leaving, at the cost of mental impoverishment, the way open to acting out, including paranoia and murder" (*Strangers* 188, 190). Oswald clearly exhibits these traits, becoming the abject, the uncanny, instead of recognizing and being disturbed by it.

Perhaps *Running Dog* and *Libra*, when viewed alone, do suggest that the mediated self, the self saturated in postmodern buzz, has lost all benefit of primary identification and ceased to be a *self* at all for DeLillo. Both *Great Jones Street* and *White Noise*, however, suggest that this is not entirely the case. In each novel, the main character retains enough vestige of selfhood to make perceptive observations about those

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instance at least, paralyzingly" (65). Oswald thus becomes "paralyzed" into the self, the role given to him by the CIA conspirators.

who surround him, as well as to participate in meaningful relationships with one or more people he loves.

DeLillo's 1973 *Great Jones Street*, for example, is about a famous rock star, Bucky Wunderlick, and the entourage of business and music capitalists who own his name and reputation. The novel opens with Bucky having just left his group's road tour and going into hiding in a small New York apartment. The first short chapter is a collection of his thoughts about fame. "Fame requires every kind of excess," he begins. "The famous man is compelled, eventually, to commit suicide" (1). Bucky connects his precarious mental state with the degree of ownership his fans feel toward him, identifying a nearly murderous love that his fame compels: "during a performance the boys and girls directly below us, scratching at the stage, were less murderous in their love of me, as if realizing finally that my death, to be authentic, must be self-willed--a successful piece of instruction only if it occurred by my own hand, preferably in a foreign city" (2). From the beginning in this novel, DeLillo aligns fame with death. Discussing the ecstatic nature of rock music, Catherine Clément explains how its excesses, intending to ward off the abject horror of mortality, ironically tend toward death: The deaths of rock musicians

> are not "premature," but rather preapproved: they occur in them to offset any future deterioration. Because of this, "excess" is everywhere, not only in the "too-strong" dose, the overdose. *Over* is the order of the day: too much percussion, too many lights, too much screaming, too many decibels, too many nights, too much jouissance, a deliberate overflow of life, from which the nothingness of sleep and expiration are absent. (210)

DeLillo thus makes Bucky unusually aware of the tendency toward abject self-

destruction that is the undercurrent of rock musician fame.

Exhausted from travel and tired of fame's possession of him, Bucky hibernates in order to meditate on his identity. In his memory of this withdrawal, "Great Jones Street was a time of prayerful fatigue. . . . I was preoccupied with conserving myself for some unknown ordeal to come and did not make work by engaging in dialogues, or taking more than the minimum number of steps to get from place to place, or urinating unnecessarily" (19). Bucky speaks as if his selfhood is a machine with a depleted gas tank, running on fumes, ready to sputter and die with the least amount of exertion. Mark Osteen suggests that in hiding from the public, Bucky "seeks objecthood as a means of recovering a 'pure' identity outside the series of images he has presented to the public, which has swallowed and regurgitated them in half-digested form" (47). On the contrary, it seems that objecthood is precisely what he is trying to escape. Bucky's status as a commodity leads him to discover that he is no longer free to do anything that will not in turn become noticed, famous, and fashionable. In retiring from the public and thinking about himself for a period of time, Bucky seeks to renew his subjectivity. The question becomes whether Bucky can undo the process experienced by Oswald: can he go from "Bucky Wunderlick," the personality, back to being Bucky, the person?

Bucky's secret hide-out does not remain a secret for long. The novel is structured around a series of visits paid to him by a strange network of "people" who work for the system. Many conversations with these visitors emphasize the false or assumed selfhood of those trapped by the fame industry. For example, one anonymous guest from Bucky's label, Transparanoia Records, informs him that Azarian, the band's substitute lead singer, has been in a car accident: "His face is being reconstructed with skin and bone taken from

the faces of volunteers. His voice is not his voice. It belongs to a donor" (22). When this man wants to make up a story about Bucky's whereabouts that would involve his own purported accident and a stay "in some rich private clinic in south central Maryland," Bucky objects to this use of false names even in referring to places: "There's no such region as south central Maryland" (22). But the sunglass-wearing visitor prevails, arguing, "The plain man of business is gone from the earth. . . . Transparanoia markets facsimiles. Everybody under contract has his or her facsimile" (24). As Bucky gives in and agrees, "I'm wherever you want me to be" (23), he is also essentially saying "I'm *whoever* you want me to be." Appropriately, the chapter concludes with Bucky's observation, "I could see myself reflected in his glasses" (24). In this moment recalling Lacan's mirror phase, Bucky adapts his *self* to the image he sees reflected in the corporate representative's glasses--not to the image he sees in the man's eyes, however, since DeLillo's implication is that anyone working so diligently for the system has already surrendered his selfhood completely. This visitor's eyes--potential windows into his self--are fittingly covered by the slick, reflective surface of marketed coolness.

Several other nearly faceless characters, all supposedly working for Transparanoia, also emphasize this strange flattening of the self who has been conquered by capitalism. As Osteen points out, "If the characters' interchangeability makes a first reading of the novel rather dizzying, that indistinguishability is precisely the point: obsessively pursuing products and seeking to impress pop royalty, they have become human simulacra" (53-54).[4] The man referred to as Dr. Pepper, for example, wears a

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[4] Jean Baudrillard provides the classic definition of the postmodern simulacrum in his article "The Precession of Simulacra." Many critics have linked Baudrillard's theories with DeLillo's fiction,

"deadpan expression" which "was classically intact, put together from a strip of silent film, frame by frame. His speech was flat and rickety, hard-working in its plainness, the voice of an actor delivering monologues from a rocking chair" (170). The man calling himself Menefee explains, "So I got myself apprenticed to Dr. Pepper and since then I've developed unbelievably in terms of seeing myself as a full-service container with access outlets" (220). And the traveler Hanes, who declares "I've been through so many time zones I'm almost bodiless" (210), is proud of his flexibility as a mid-level corporate chameleon: "I'd rather be used than use others. It's easy to be used. There's no passion or morality. You're free to be nothing. I read their mail. I look in all the confidential files. When I deliver personal notes from floor to floor, I read them in the stairwell. I feel I'm free to do these things. The only thing that unfrees me is music" (45). Even the name of the company--Transparanoia--implies a flawed subjectivity wherein a person imagines that their self is identified and pursued by multiple others. Through this odd assortment of brand-name characters, DeLillo humorously illustrates a characteristic of postmodern commodity culture that Robert Dunn describes:

> Images, fashions, and lifestyles manufactured by the media industries become sources of self-image and vehicles by which the self perceives others. The "other-directed" orientation of developed modernity becomes fully absorbed in the mediations of consumerism, the media, and advertising. To the extent that we define ourselves through acts of

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particularly with Murray and Jack's visit to "The Most Photographed Barn in America" in *White Noise* (12): Lou Caton in "Romanticism and the Postmodern Novel: Three Scenes from Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," Joseph Conte's chapter "Noise and Signal: Information Theory in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," William Little's chapter "(Mis)Spelling Disaster: Faith in *White Noise*," and Leonard Wilcox in "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative."

> consumption, our relationship to others and to ourselves is mediated by commodities and especially [by] the form they take as images. (66)

Trying to remain a "real" person while owned by this consumer industry that has marketed his fame, Bucky is understandably disoriented.

Bucky's impersonal encounters with these interchangeable corporate types are juxtaposed, however, with his experience of love when his girlfriend, Opel, comes to visit his apartment. Described as a devotee of Eastern philosophy, Opel reads the *Upanishads* and "Non-attachment turns her on" (9). The happiest, most human moments in the novel are those shared between the two. As Bucky narrates, "We lived in bed as old couples rock on porches, without hurry or need, content to blend into benevolent materials, to become, for instance, wood" (55). Unlike Selvy's and Oswald's experience outside of selfhood, as they took up the role of assassin and identified no one else as Other, Bucky is ecstatically outside himself with a loved other who can provide the identification that renews his own subjectivity. After spending so many hours in each other's presence, Bucky even loses track of which body belongs to him and which to Opel. He asks, "Is that you? . . . I thought it was me. I've been sitting here thinking that mound was me. Or that mound had me under it." Opel replies, "How could you think that? You're there and I'm here. You're the chair. I'm the bed" (64). These moments highlight the beneficial side of abjection as self loss, as the space in the self that allows two people to connect, to merge, to take a break from the weight of human subjectivity. Reflecting on this phenomenon, Bucky says, "I had never known exactly what we needed from each other. Maybe it was enough to come and go; we were each other's motion and rest" (90). This scene also provides an illustration of Sartre's point that self-consciousness involves

experiencing one's self as an object for an other: "[T]he Other is revealed to me as the subject for whom I am an object. . . . I exist therefore for myself as known by the Other--in particular in my very facticity. I exist for myself as a body known by the Other" (327).

Whereas Bucky finds himself renewed in their relationship, however, Opel does not seem to experience that same level of connection. In asking "How could you think that?" when Bucky wonders if that "mound" on the bed is him or her, Opel implies that she cannot recall such a boundary-blurring experience with another person. Instead, she seeks to lose herself by completely merging with music: she wanted "to keep moving. To forget everything. To *be* the sound. That was the only tide she heeded. She wanted to exist as music does, nowhere, beyond the maps of language" (12). Opel found a profession that fits her way of being. She is involved with undercover transporting assignments for the Happy Valley Farm Commune and is staying with Bucky only until she receives her next assignment. Her lack of active subjectivity is revealed as she tells him, "I don't speak till I'm spoken to . . . [;] I just sprawl out in bed and wait for events to take shape" (59). Chapters later, however, Opel is in despair about her profession and her identity, telling Bucky, "Look at me. What have I become in the scheme of human evolution? Luggage. I'm luggage. By choice, inclination and occupation" (91). Opel's stop at Bucky's apartment is merely a layover in her many travels. Furthermore, her "self" seems only to consist of her body as baggage--the "luggage"--that she carries around with her. Discussing Opel's surrender to commodity culture, Osteen writes,

> [Opel] seeks immobility as an antidote to traveling, a word that comes to represent buying and selling of any kind: a traveler is a salesperson who loses all shadings of self and becomes an instrument of commerce, a

> container for products--"luggage." Paradoxically, traveling, not stasis, is the route to commodification: one circulates in the consumer economy and thereby becomes a thing. To counteract this narrowing, she stays with Bucky, hoping to attain a purer "thingness," to resist commodification through utter inertness. (49-50)

Yet, Opel cannot achieve this state of "thingness" while living with a man who recognizes her, in love, as a person. She further knows that Happy Valley employers will soon find her and force her return to dehumanizing work. Immersed in Eastern philosophy and used by Western capitalism--systems both seeking to alter her subjectivity--Opel commits suicide. Neither able to merge into ecstatic non-being through music and mysticism nor to be satisfied as a circulated object transporting other commodities, she chooses her only permanent escape into the abject. Her job as a transporter of goods for others' profit illustrates Sartre's point that "in so far as I am the instrument of possibilities which are not my possibilities, whose pure presence beyond my being I can not even glimpse, and which deny my transcendence in order to constitute me as a means to ends of which I am ignorant--I am *in danger*" (243-44). Opel's suicide is the result of a self's ideological tug-of-war between two extremes, neither of which DeLillo seems to advocate.

Bucky's grief at Opel's death is described realistically--a startling event in a novel portraying few scenes using realism. He carries her body to a local hospital, thinking, "I wanted someone who believed in St. Vincent himself, in his ideals, in his sacrifices, whatever these may have been. . . [;] someone who believed in the sacredness of dying and the veneration of the dead" (93). His only comfort is found in sleep, when he can

cease carrying the weight of his own sadness: "The bed was a vast welcoming organism, a sea culture or synthetic plant, enraptured by the object it absorbed" (142). In allowing him to feel the relief of existing as an object, this enjoyment of sleep further emphasizes his subjectivity while he is awake. Bucky's emotion towards Opel, in love and death, proves that he escaped from his rock star life of fame in time to preserve his selfhood and that he is a three-dimensional person who stands in contrast to the two-dimensional, seemingly masked characters who circulate in and out of his life. Furthermore, Opel's Eastern philosophy and the drug-culture attitude of the Happy Valley crowd is eventually parodied. At a party late in the book, Globke's silly girlfriend, Michelle, is also a Happy Valley disciple, preaching the gospel of non-self to Bucky: "Once we have freed ourselves of fear and desire, no act we perform is more important than the act that precedes it or the act that follows. Non-attachment is the path to beyond-reality. Beyond-reality is where our true nature indwells. The body is an illusion. . . . Evil is nothing more than attachment" (237). Michelle is echoing the very beliefs of anti-subjectivity that led Opel to commit suicide. While non-attachment to postmodern commodities was the positive benefit of Opel's Eastern philosophy, in throwing out all forms of attachment including those to other people, she forfeits a precondition of being a subject. As Eagleton writes, "It is others who are the custodians of my selfhood" (212). DeLillo implies that attachment, both to Bucky and to herself, is what ultimately might have saved Opel.

The complexities of human abjection are also revealed in Bucky's neighbors. Upstairs from him lives a man named Fenig who writes pornographic books for children. Touting himself as a capitalist expert who has found a vast, untapped market of literature,

he brags to Bucky, "I'm a two-time Laszlo Piatakof Murder Mystery Award nominee. My one-acters get produced without exception at a very hip agricultural college in Arkansas. . . . I've been anthologized in hard cover, paperback and goddamn vellum" (27). Bucky also notices that each time he visits him, Fenig is always dressed the same way: "His clothes, freshly laundered, were the same as those he'd worn every other time we'd talked. . . . In Fenig's closet were four more Fenigs, laced, hooded, neatly creased" (223). A carbon copy of himself on a daily basis, Fenig is "successful" but frightening in his willingness to create anything for money (or for the penny his name represents). As Osteen writes, "In submitting to the power of the simulacrum that Bucky resists, Fenig measures his value strictly by the serial productions he has sold" (51). What is most odd about this man is not that he finds his identity in economic or publishing success--common occurrences in capitalist society--but, rather, that he exudes such satisfaction with him*self* and seems perfectly at ease writing children's pornography for profit. In its impersonal, objectified use of the body, pornography is, by nature, abject. Pornography for children, then, is only more so. If any character in the novel should experience himself in unsettled abjection it is probably Fenig who ironically, disturbingly, does not.

In sharp contrast to Fenig is Bucky's downstairs neighbor, the unnamed Micklewhite boy who is deformed, unable to speak, and perhaps even unaware of himself or his surroundings. Before ever meeting the boy or his mother, Bucky is occasionally haunted by the strange sounds emanating from their apartment: "Maybe nature had become imbecilic here, forcing its pain to find a voice, this moan of interrupted gestation. . . . There seems to be a fundamental terror inside things that grow . . . and this is what the boy's oppressive dreams brought reeking to the surface, the beauty and horror of

wordless things" (51-52). Whereas Fenig's warped subjectivity borders on the criminal and reflects heartless capitalism, the Micklewhite boy presents an opposing picture of the human body, trapped in a state prior to language, crying out from a remote space of pre-subjectivity. Neither character is a legitimate candidate for relationship, but for very different reasons. Fenig's failure to be a healthy subject seems to be blamed on society, whereas the boy's limitation is blamed on nature.

When Bucky does meet the Micklewhites, his simple question about the boy's name is answered by the mother who, in the way she talks about her son, seems frighteningly heartless, like Fenig: "He don't have a name. We never figured he'd live past four months with a head like his head. But did we get fooled. Did we get stuck with a lemon. My husband, he figured make the best of it. Find an interested party and either sell the kid outright or lease him by the month. Carnivals, they have seasons" (134-35). Bucky's difference from these stereotypical postmodern characters is once again revealed in his sensitive perception of the Micklewhite boy as he first sees him:

> He wasn't sitting or reclining; he was stored there. . . . The boy was unforgettable in the sheer organic power of his presence. . . . One felt nearly displaced by the hint of structural transposition; he was what we'd always feared, ourselves in radical divestment, scrawled across the dark. Instead of leaving I went closer, drawn into what I felt was his ascendancy, the helpless strength of his entrapment in tepid flesh, in the reductions of being. . . . I began to note his embryonic beauty. (161)

Here the Micklewhite boy is a grown embodiment of the pre-linguistic subject. His similarity to Kristeva's definition of the abject is striking: the "jettisoned object" which

"is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses"; "a brutish suffering that 'I' puts up with, sublime and devastated"; "familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life," it "now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either" (*Powers* 2). Unlike the boy's mother, Bucky cannot disregard him. From his apartment, Bucky is attentive to the boy's moans; while in the same room with him, he feels compelled to look at the boy, to acknowledge his presence even though he is nameless.[5] Only an abject subject could identify with and be moved by his own similarity to a figure of such raw abjection. The boy's mother, however, like Fenig, is disturbing precisely because of her lack of resonance with or recognition of the abject.

One primary irony of the novel is that Bucky himself ends up in a state similar to that of the Micklewhite boy. First, his identity as a rock star is taken away. The demise of his band is foreshadowed when Azarian tells him, "We no longer exist in the old sense. . . . I guess we broke up because I heard it on the radio. It sounded pretty official. Who has final word in these matters?" (181). Then Bucky learns that he is trapped in a conspiracy uniting Transparanoia Records and Opel's associates at Happy Valley Farm Commune. Urged to commit suicide in order to complete the arc of his rock star fame, he refuses and instead cuts a deal with the Commune leader, Chess. Bucky agrees to be given a drug that leaves him unable to use language for a period of time. Osteen makes a relevant point here, providing another way of looking at Bucky as an abject figure:

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[5] Mark Osteen draws a parallel between the Micklewhite boy's meaningless cries and the type of art Bucky sought to create through music: "The Micklewhite boy represents Bucky's own inchoate reborn self, and his wordlessness constitutes the 'pure' form of expression that Bucky has been seeking" (55). Furthermore, Osteen points out that "the Micklewhite boy is the one person in the novel who does not respond at all to

"Bucky's need to sacrifice himself amounts to recognition of his own valuelessness. Georges Bataille's writings on sacrifice and waste are particularly pertinent here. For Bataille excess--the surplus taken from the mass of useful wealth, the waste, the unusable--is a primary fact of political economy. Bucky has become this 'accursed share': the scapegoat or hero whose violent death both consecrates the victim and preserves the community" (56-57). Bucky becomes the waste product of the system he chose to no longer participate in. In seeking to punish him, however, Chess ironically gives Bucky an immediate ticket to the irresponsible, wordless bliss of pre-subjectivity.

After being injected with the drug that makes him mute, Bucky finally achieves his much desired vacation from fame and his frustrating interactions with commodified people. As he explains near the end of the novel, "Having no words for the things around me affected even my movements across the room. I walked more slowly, as though in fear of objects, all things with names unknown to me. . . . I was unreasonably happy, subsisting in blessed circumstance, thinking of myself as a kind of living chant. I made interesting and original sounds" (264). The words "blessed" and "chant" suggest an almost religious or ecstatic state of existence here. They also imply a childlike joy in being, simply for being's sake, which stands in contrast to Opel's attitude in her practice of mysticism and her decision to commit suicide. Bucky initially appears to have no language--and therefore no selfhood--apart from the capitalist system that has consumed his identity. He exists in the infant's happy state prior to subjectivity. But as the novel ends, he is remembering words, getting his voice back, and wondering what to do with

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Bucky's fame; he is utterly self-absorbed, trapped in his helpless body. He has managed to achieve what Bucky has futilely sought in withdrawal: escape from commodification" (55).

himself. "It's just a question of what sound to make or fake," he thinks (265), perhaps wondering whether to participate in this shallow society once more or to live a more authentic existence, somewhere else, on his own--if such a postmodern place can be found.

In allowing Bucky to remember and describe what he felt during his exile from language, DeLillo suggests that there *is* a self behind linguistic subjectivity. (Perhaps this is why the Micklewhite boy is often crying.) Bucky's final narration constitutes his memory of strolling language-less through the city, when he recorded but could not speak these observations: "Pigeons and meningitis. Chocolate and mouse droppings. Licorice and roach hairs. Vermin on the bus we took uptown. I wondered how long I'd choose to dwell in these middle ages of plague and usury, living among traceless men and women, those whose only peace was in shouting ever more loudly" (263). Seemingly given the clarity of a child or a saint, Bucky sees the sweet and the foul, the abject circumstances of people and the harms of a society designed to increasingly drown out their individual voices. Formed and maintained through an identification with a loved other, the self is alive here; it is just bombarded and abused on all sides.

Just as Bucky seems to be the only self remaining in *Great Jones Street*, in *White Noise* Jack Gladney is another protagonist who feels dangerously close to becoming the capitalist facsimile of a person. Jack is a humorous caricature of late-twentieth-century academia who has invented his own department of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill. Like the Brady Bunch, the Gladneys are a patchwork family with "his" and "her" children from previous marriages. Ideal consumers in a fast food age, they are often more comfortable going out to eat than sitting around a dining room table where they

would have to look at each other. The supermarket and the mall are bright places in this culture, where money seemingly *can* buy all the components of happiness. When Jack's family is not shopping they can count on the TV and radio to confirm their buying power by talking about what they could buy in the future, pointing to a future, better self as well. These forms of media actually become characters in the family; when there is a pause in household "noise," the TV or radio usually "says" something to fill the silence.[6] But the novel's intersecting plot lines of the "Airborne Toxic Event" and Dylar--the drug supposedly able to eliminate a person's fear of death--reveal that beneath the shiny surfaces of postmodern culture, the Gladneys and their community remain as fragile as any pre-modern human beings. Technology may cover the stark face of abjection, masking fear, illness, and age with its carnival of "white noise," but human life remains just as vulnerable and real for Jack.

In *White Noise* DeLillo again emphasizes the cookie-cutter effect that postmodern culture can have on people. Many characters function merely as types, with small details identifying them as part of a large, generic group. The department heads at the College-on-the-Hill, for example, have established a simulacrum of personality: on campus, they all wear dark glasses and academic robes. Their identity consists of their image as "professor." Jack is surprisingly honest about the facade of his academic role. Although

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[6] The TV and radio speak the language of brand names in *White Noise*, along with the narrated fragments of noise in the text. "Waffleos and Kabooms," "Dum-Dum pops," and "Mystic mints" are named on the first page alone. DeLillo also gives lists of product titles frequently which stand as their own paragraph, often with no direct link to what comes before or after them: "Tegrin, Denorex, Selsun Blue" (289), "Krylon, Rust-Oleum, Red Devil" (159), "Weejuns, Walabees, Hush Puppies" (287). While these name trios delineate clearly defined product categories--dandruff shampoo, spray-on protectants, shoes--their presence in the text seems superfluous. As John Frow points out, however, these products have a fixed identity more so than many of the other indeterminate signs in the text: "the proper name is its own absolute origin. . . . Whereas the sign causes unease, a sense that there is more to be known, the proper name is the site of a

creator and director of the Hitler Studies department, Jack admits, "I am the false character that follows the name around" (17). A Hitler expert who cannot even speak German, he carries *Mein Kampf* around for appearance's sake but can read the book only in translation. In self-consciously identifying the performative mask of his career, Jack also is susceptible to a self-distancing that Erving Goffman describes: "To the degree that the individual maintains a show before others that he himself does not believe, he can come to experience a special kind of alienation from self and a special kind of wariness of others" (236). These qualities make Jack an especially interesting narrator.

"The college student" is another vacuous type illustrated as the novel opens with the fall parade of family station wagons bringing their sons and daughters to school. Identified by their possessions and snack foods, the interchangeable students belong to equally interchangeable parents: "The conscientious suntans. The well-made faces and wry looks. . . . The women crisp and alert, in diet trim, knowing people's names. Their husbands content to measure out the time, distant but ungrudging, accomplished in parenthood, something about them suggesting massive insurance coverage" (3). Lou Caton believes "DeLillo's vision of cars as a stream of machines slowly weaving through a pastoral landscape implies that these students are products of an assembly-line culture. The opening procession of station wagons doubles as a mechanical pilgrimage or industrial wagon train" (110). Furthermore, Caton adds, "Accenting their hard opacity, DeLillo refuses to give these students emotional and personal details; instead they are defined by the things that surround them. A college student seems, in this scene at least,

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magical plenitude" (429, 425). Brand names in the novel are thus more firm, more definitive, than the named characters representing people in the text.

to be a constructed product, not a transcendent being" (110). Caton assumes that "constructed product" and "transcendent being" are mutually exclusive, however, and I am not sure that must be the case. What is clear is DeLillo's focus on this phenomenon of group identification, established according to outward, purchased signs. As Murray Siskind, Jack's colleague and a "visiting lecturer on living icons" (10), warns his students, "Once you're out of school, it is only a matter of time before you experience the vast loneliness and dissatisfaction of consumers who have lost their group identity" (50). Spokesperson for culture and perhaps for DeLillo as well, Murray points out how any group not identified as fashionable is cast aside, abjected, in an image-driven society.

The Gladney family exhibits a similar devotion to image and to the (false) security found through participation in commodity culture. Referring to those identical wealthy parents who drop off their college students each fall, Babette says "I have trouble imagining death at that income level" (6). Similarly, Jack later comments about Babette's teaching posture lessons two nights a week in a church basement: "We seem to believe it is possible to ward off death by following rules of good grooming" (27). These comments support Osteen's point that "for Jack and many contemporary Americans, consuming attaches persons to the things whose reproducibility betokens immortality" (171). It is fitting, then, that when the family goes shopping together Jack provides an extended description of conspicuous consumption as a spiritual experience. As in much of the novel, here he achieves a tone of wry amusement blended with serious confession, in addition to the heightened self-awareness of any good DeLillo character:

> It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested . . . [,] in

> the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls--it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening. (20)

Much has been made of DeLillo's vivid descriptions here.[7] Clearly the mall serves as a cathedral of postmodern consumption and spending as a form of worship, both of capitalism and of capitalism's promise about whom a person's future self can become. From the standpoint of abjection and the mirror-phase, however, what I find most interesting are Jack's frequent comments that the shopping center's entranceways and escalator passages are covered in mirrors:

> People swarmed through the boutiques and gourmet shops. Organ music rose from the great court. We smelled chocolate, popcorn, cologne; we smelled rugs and furs, hanging salamis and deathly vinyl. . . . I kept seeing myself unexpectedly in some reflecting surface. . . . I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed. . . . Our images appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome, on TV monitors in security

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[7] Lou Caton, for example, includes us all in the group of *White Noise*'s postmodern devoted shoppers: "We religiously embrace whatever image popular culture devises for us; in this case, DeLillo's characters see themselves as consumers. They are financially essential, not only targeted but coveted by business strategists. Our objectified, exchange-value lives are sacred in the world of commerce" (113). Similarly, Joseph Conte describes the postmodern brain as thoroughly programmed by ubiquitous circuits of advertising: "The signifier in the media culture truly precedes the material signified. In this context the brain becomes no more than another programmable circuit, an extension of the electronic network in which power and money flow to the automobile manufacturer or tobacco producer who most successfully disseminates its identifying code. Once the multinationals have penetrated the 'substatic region' of your child's brain, another young consumer has been territorialized" (124).

rooms. (83-84)

Reinforcements of shallow selfhood occur here in the midst of public spectacle. Vivid sights and smells, all available for purchase, are experienced simultaneously with unexpected and omnipresent views of the purchasing *self*, reminding shoppers of their identity as buyers while they at the same time, ironically, purchase products to make them more similar to everyone else. The distinction toward which the text points is between the stable self who chooses to buy products and the unstable, abject self who has absorbed capitalism's message that the self is constructed through the very process of buying.

This dynamic is described in John Berger's "Glamour and Publicity" in which he argues that in promising a democratic array of purchasing options, capitalism paradoxically constrains consumers' free will by determining not only what they buy but, most of all, *that* they buy. Publicity "proposes to each of us that we transform ourselves, or our lives, by buying something more. This more, it proposes, will make us in some way richer--even though we will be poorer by having spent our money" (374). Berger further explains his point by describing a division in the self-consciousness steeped in commodity capitalism that is analogous to abjection: The consumer "lives in the contradiction between what he is and what he would like to be. . . . The gap between what publicity actually offers and the future it promises, corresponds with the gap between what the spectator-buyer feels himself to be and what he would like to be" (376). Having relinquished control of their dreams, their decisions, their finances, and ultimately their definition of selfhood, individuals who have fully succumbed to such ideology are abject, allowing their subjectivity to be defined before the thrones--or under the throes--of media

and marketplace.

The marketability and shallowness of such social identity is revealed in Jack's home life as well. Each of his children seems partially surrendered to postmodernity's assault on selfhood. Noticing that Denise insists on wearing a green visor for several days in a row, Jack comments, "Something about the visor seemed to speak to her, to offer wholeness and identity" (37). Later, he adds that Denise "is the kind of child who feels a protective tenderness toward her own beginnings. It is part of her strategy in a world of displacements to make every effort to restore and preserve, keep things together for their value as remembering objects, a way of fastening herself to a life" (103). Steffie, the one who "burns toast often, at any hour, intentionally" (47), walks around the SIMUVAC evacuation camp with her protective mask on when such precautions are no longer necessary:

> She walked along the walls, a set of pale green eyes, discerning, alert, secretive. She watched people as if they could not see her watching, as if the mask covered her eyes instead of leaving them exposed. People thought she was playing a game. They winked at her, said hi. I was certain it would take at least another day before she felt safe enough to remove the protective device. (161)

Osteen observes that the personalities of the Gladney children are also affected by their mix-and-match status, their being the products of Jack's five marriages to four women: "Shuttling between parents, the children need to be resilient. . . . The Gladney house thus resembles an airport, a switching yard, or motel where the children can learn to shift allegiances, to redesign their filial and familial packages" (169). Even Jack's attitude

toward his daughter Bee reflects this when she visits: "I admired her in a distant and uneasy way, sensing a nameless threat, as if she were not my child at all but the sophisticated and self-reliant friend of one of my children" (94).

It is Jack's son Heinrich, however, who most reflects the poststructuralist ideology that there *is* no such thing as the "self." Already losing his hair at age fourteen, Heinrich plays chess by mail with an imprisoned convict and is friends with Orest Mercator, the kid who is televised for his record-breaking attempts at being enclosed with poisonous snakes. Heinrich views both the weather and himself empirically. When Jack simply asks him how he would like to spend the summer (Heinrich's hippie mother would like him to spend it at an ashram in Montana), he replies, "Who knows what I want to do? Who knows what anyone wants to do? . . . I can't control what happens in my brain, so how can I be sure what I want to do ten seconds from now. . . . It's all this activity in the brain and you don't know what's you as a person and what's some neuron that just happens to fire or just happens to misfire?" (45-46). Jack later overhears Heinrich saying to Denise, "If the eye is a mystery, totally forget the ear. Just say 'cochlea' to somebody, they look at you like, 'Who's this guy?' . . . How can people live their whole lives without knowing the names of their own parts of the body?" (158). Heinrich repeatedly shocks his father with his coldly scientific approach to himself and others.

Having children he barely comprehends, Jack's primary security in life is that his fourth wife, Babette, is someone he knows and can count on. He appreciates her girth and the plenitude of her body that has not been reduced or controlled by postmodern styling techniques. Describing her, he says "Babette, disheveled, has the careless dignity

of someone too preoccupied with serious matters to know or care what she looks like" (5). Furthermore, Jack's love of Babette is portrayed as genuine and deep: "Love helps us develop an identity secure enough to allow itself to be placed in another's care and protection. Babette and I have turned our lives for each other's thoughtful regard" (29). Like Bucky's feelings for Opel, Jack's care for Babette seems intended to show that even if no one else in this society is real, this man *is* because he bears emotion for and commitment to another. Both women, however, eventually prove to lack the strength of subjectivity, and hence of love, that these men possess.

After Jack's repeated emphasis of Babette's dependability, readers are just as shocked as he is to discover that she is cheating on him. Babette has been sleeping with Willie Mink once a week to obtain a free supply of Dylar, the drug advertised as eliminating the fear of death. She tries to explain her behavior to Jack by telling him that she was distanced from herself during these encounters: "No one was inside anymore. That is stupid usage. I did what I had to do. I was remote. I was operating outside myself. It was a capitalist transaction" (194). Furthermore, Babette says, the primary reason she needs the drug is precisely because her love for Jack is so great that she is paralyzed with fear at the thought of him dying before she does: "Jack, when you die, I will just fall to the floor and stay there. Eventually, maybe, after a very long time, they will find me crouching in the dark, a woman without speech or gesture" (269). Babette's picture of herself here is one of abject grief, of a subject not speaking and not acting because it cannot function without its beloved other. The treatment of her body as a mere object who had sex with Minks can perhaps be balanced by her motivation as a loving subject. Yet, Babette's secret drug-addiction and affair show that she has been consumed

both by an abject fear of death and by behavior that specifically throws her*self* away. Eagleton makes a comment that is relevant here: "Death is both alien and intimate to us, neither wholly strange nor purely one's own. To this extent, one's relationship to it resembles one's relationship to other people, who are likewise both fellows and strangers" (211). In fearing death to this extent, Babette's choices make her a stranger to her own husband.

Following Babette's revelation, Jack's anger is eventually channeled into a plan to hunt down and shoot Willie Mink. He steals their neighbors' car and drives to a drab Iron City motel where the drug supplier is staying. According to Jack's description, the crime spree brings him new freedom: "This must be how people escape the pull of the earth, the gravitational leaf-flutter that brings us hourly closer to dying. Simply stop obeying. Steal instead of buy, shoot instead of talk" (302-03). Jack's strange encounter with Mink, whom he has been referring to as "Mr. Grey," is reminiscent of Kinbote's dealings with the shadowy Jack Grey--another parody of self versus non-self, bounded law-abiding citizen versus the abject element who lives on the margins.[8] Immediately after shooting Mink in a metaphorical encounter with the abject, in fact, Jack seemingly returns to ***himself*** and saves Mink's life. Telling himself "Get past disgust. Forgive the

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[8] Many interesting observations have been made about Mink's character. Stephen DoCarmo points out that he is so caricatured and far removed from behaving like a stable subject that Jack's motive as a husband seeking revenge is thwarted: "The problem for Jack is that Mink is not equal to his own 'self-ish' purposes. Dominating and (almost) destroying a man who simply is not there, or whose own self is so thoroughly dispersed by chemicals, media, and trans-national migration, leaves Jack's monstrously meaningful transgression hollow and pointless" (17). Frank Lentricchia reads Mink as the absurd apotheosis of the consumer/capitalist cycle which began when "America" was established in the "New World": "Willy Mink is the promised end of a journey that began on the *Mayflower*, the shocking *telos* of the third-person ideal, the 'I' converted to bits and pieces of language not his own. Sitting in front of the TV, throwing fistfuls of Dylar at his mouth, babbling, Willy Mink is a compacted image of consumerism in the society of the electronic media, a figure of madness, but our figure of madness" (95)--the ultimate, exaggerated embodiment of an amoral, technologically abject figure.

foul body. Embrace it whole" (314), he gives Mink mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and drives him to a nearby hospital. His own socially abject resort to criminal behavior leads Jack into direct contact with the bodily abject form of Mink's wounded and nearly dying human body. DeLillo's sequence of scenes such as this, in *White Noise* as well as other novels, illustrates Kristeva's point that "[t]he abject, mimed through sound and meaning, is *repeated*. Getting rid of it is out of the question . . . . It is a repetition through rhythm and song, therefore through what is not yet, or no longer is 'meaning,' but arranges, defers, differentiates and organizes, harmonizes pathos, bile, warmth, and enthusiasm" (28). Like a psychoanalyst noting eruptions of the subconscious in his patients' speech, DeLillo allows the abject to erupt into the lives of his characters.

Encounters with the abject do occur intermittently throughout *White Noise*, bothering one character while not bothering another, reminding everyone that human life remains a bodily situation and thus messy, even in the age of postmodern technology. In one instance Jack is startled by the physical contact between himself and Howard Dunlop, his German teacher, when Howard reaches into his mouth to help Jack pronounce a word correctly: "Once he reached in with his right hand to adjust my tongue. It was a strange and terrible moment, an act of haunting intimacy. No one had ever handled my tongue before" (173). The incident clearly goes unnoticed by Howard, who simply views his student's tongue as an independent, linguistic tool. Jack's daughters also reveal different stances to the abject through their differing attitudes toward taking a bath. Denise reports of her sister Steffie:

> "She's just sitting in all that dirty water."
>
> "It's my dirt," Steffie said from the other side of the door.

"It's still dirt."

"Well it's my dirt and I don't care."

"It's dirt," Denise said.

"It's my dirt."

"Dirt is dirt."

"Not when it's mine." (96)

DeLillo here captures not only a realistic argument between sisters but a differing attitude toward the sloughing off of self and the precautions that must be taken to preserve a self's cleanliness and, thus, proper boundaries--Kristeva's *propre*, meaning both clean and proper.

Carefully controlled in the fluorescent space of the supermarket, the abject nature of food, on the other hand, is barely noticeable and even pleasant. On one visit Jack observes, "There were two new developments in the supermarket, a butcher's corner and a bakery, and the oven aroma of bread and cake combined with the sight of a bloodstained man pounding at strips of living veal was pretty exciting for us all" (167). Animal blood blends smoothly into sweet bakery smells in the store's sterile environment. At home as well, Jack notes how easily waste food products are made to disappear thanks to the conveniences of the postmodern kitchen: "I flipped a switch and somewhere beneath the sink a grinding mechanism reduced parings, rinds and animal fats to tiny drainable fragments" (101). These moments illustrate Murray's comment later in the novel that technology "is what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies" (285).

In another scene, when Jack meets his third wife, Tweedy Browner, she is

characterized as particularly afraid and incapable of dealing with abjectness herself. Jack's initial description hints at this: "There was a sense of Protestant disrepair about her, a collapsed aura in which her body struggled to survive" (86). Perhaps too much asceticism and not enough humanity in Tweedy were partly responsible for the break-up of her marriage to Jack. Further reason for their divorce is given in their clipped conversation, beginning with Jack's accusation:

> "You wore gloves to bed."
>
> "I still do."
>
> "Gloves, eyeshades and socks."
>
> "You know my flaws. You always did. I'm ultrasensitive to many things."
>
> "Sunlight, air, food, water, sex."
>
> "Carcinogenic, every one of them." (88)

In wanting her *self* to be free of all traces of the abject, Tweedy reveals how unsettled she is with her own subjectivity. Eagleton writes of such people who seek impossible purity, "They cannot accept the unspeakable truth that the slimy, contagious stuff they wage war upon, far from being alien, is as close to them as breathing" (217). Also significant is Tweedy's brief reminiscence of her mother who, in an earlier time, experienced her*self* very differently: "Mother used to stand in the arbor with an armful of cut flowers. Just stand there, being what she was" (89). Tweedy seems to wish that life were as simple and safe as it was in her mother's time and also to indicate that it decidedly is not.

Jack has this conversation with Tweedy while they are at the airport to pick up their daughter Bee. Their wait is interrupted by a frightened parade of passengers whose

plane nearly crashed: "They were gray and stricken, they were stooped over in weariness and shock, dragging their hand luggage across the floor. . . . Some limped, some wept. More came through the tunnel, adults with whimpering children, old people trembling, a black minister with his collar askew, one shoe missing" (89-90). One passenger takes up the role of narrator and announces loudly, to anyone who cares to listen, exactly what happened to them during their flight. When "the term 'crash landing' spread through the plane," he says, "This sentiment was expressed not so much in words and actions as in terrible and inarticulate sounds, mainly cattle noises, an urgent and force-fed lowing" (92). Then, as soon as the engines regained power and the flight appeared to be safe,

> stewardesses appeared with scented towelettes for cleaning blood and vomit. People slowly came out of their fetal positions, sat back limply. Four miles of prime-time terror. No one knew what to say. . . . The first officer walked down the aisle, smiling and chatting in an empty pleasant corporate way. His face had the rosy and confident polish that is familiar in handlers of large passenger aircraft. They looked at him and wondered why they'd been afraid. (92)

This account constitutes another instance of the abject breaking through into daily life and startling the passengers into animal-like confusion, in which state no words are adequate to the situation's fright and horror. However, even with its terror, its "blood and vomit," the experience is quickly reframed under the cold surface of airline technology and the proper manner of flight attendants who play their role, in smiling masks, very smoothly.

The characters of *White Noise* are most forcefully confronted with the abject

through the stark possibility of their own death in the "Airborne Toxic Event" section. Initially, during the evacuation of Blacksmith, "people sat in their dark cars staring out at each other through closed windows" (129). Others walked in a solemn procession, fearing for their lives and shocked by the spectacle of the event. Jack notes the variety of families and protective gear: "People with supermarket carts, people clad in every kind of bulky outfit, peering out from deep hoods. There was a family wrapped completely in plastic, a single large sheet of transparent polyethylene" (121). And he pities their human helplessness: "I feel sad for people and the queer part we play in our own disasters" (126). At the evacuation camp, however, Jack senses that the common experience of abject suffering leads to a bond: "the presence of other stranded souls, young women with infants, old and infirm people, gave us a certain staunchness and will, a selfless bent that was pronounced enough to function as a common identity" (129). Far from his role in the black robe on Wordsmith's campus, Jack realizes that everyone in this scene is united by their human helplessness in the face of death. The fear of contamination, the reminder of their own mortality, turns the people of Blacksmith back into themselves and strips off the false layers of postmodern conditioning.

In a similar moment later in the novel, Jack and Heinrich drive to see a fire burning at the local insane asylum. They notice one elderly woman, "white-haired and slight, fringed in burning air," and they "could see she was mad, so lost to dreams and furies that the fire around her head seemed almost incidental" (239). Leaving the scene, Jack thinks about "how death entered your mouth and nose, how death smelled, could somehow make a difference to your soul." They drove away, he says, "thinking of the homeless, the mad, the dead, but also of ourselves now. This is what the odor of that

burning material did. It complicated our sadness, brought us closer to the secret of our own eventual end" (240-41). This awareness and fear of death is the underlying, most pervasive element of abjection that haunts the characters of *White Noise*.

One of the Gladneys' most specific connections to the abject is their youngest child, Wilder. Early in the novel he cries loudly and desperately for nearly seven hours. Ever the analyzing academic, Jack studies his son's sounds and finds meaning in them: "The rhythmic urgency had given way to a sustained, inarticulate and mournful sound. . . . These were expressions of Mideastern lament, of an anguish so accessible that it rushes to overwhelm whatever immediately caused it. There was something permanent and soul-struck in this crying. It was a sound of inbred desolation" (77). The descriptions become remarkably similar to those DeLillo uses in *Great Jones Street* for the sounds made by the Micklewhite boy. Jack continues:

> It was a sound so large and pure I could almost listen to it, try consciously to apprehend it, as one sets up a mental register in a concert hall or theater. He was not sniveling or blubbering. He was crying out, saying nameless things in a way that touched me with its depth and richness. This was an ancient dirge all the more impressive for its resolute monotony. Ululation. (78)

In Wilder, Jack and Babette have a child still largely unaware of his own subjectivity. Jack realizes that he enjoys being around Wilder because he "is selfish without being grasping, selfish in a totally unbounded and natural way. There's something wonderful about the way he drops one thing, grabs for another" (209). Wilder lives without filtering his experience through the mechanism of reflective consciousness. Murray (again

perhaps speaking for DeLillo) later elaborates on why anyone might feel comforted in the presence of the toddler:

> You sense his total ego, his freedom from limits. . . . He doesn't know he's going to die. He doesn't know death at all. You cherish this simpleton blessing of his, this exemption from harm. You want to get close to him, touch him, look at him, breathe him in. How lucky he is. A cloud of unknowing, an omnipotent little person. The child is everything, the adult nothing. Think about it. A person's entire life is the unraveling of this conflict. No wonder we're bewildered, staggered, shattered. (289)

Again, as with the Micklewhite boy, DeLillo presents the abject power of pre-subjectivity.

In contrast to an infant's simple, pre-linguistic state of unboundedness, adults' experience of unsettled subjectivity in *White Noise* is often attributed to postmodern technology. Television, radio, tabloids, and government programs like "SIMUVAC" are all tools of culture that push humans toward various subjections, leaving them functioning less as independent subjects in their own right. These threats to selfhood are exacerbated by the proliferation of technology that continues to find easier means of turning the real into a simulation. Like many of DeLillo's later novels, this one is concerned with reproduced forms of disaster and terror, such as Murray's soliloquy on the art of car crashes and the Gladney family ritual of watching disaster footage every Friday night on TV.[9] Although consumer society insulates citizens from the abject and

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[9] Jack's colleague Alfonse explains why postmodern people (and Gladney's family) are so fascinated by disaster footage on TV: "Because we're suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to

subliminally guarantees immortality through the purchase of goods, characters' fascination with mediated violence in the novel demonstrates an uneasiness with life that seeks the reinforcement of vitality through the repetition of death. In regularly viewing horrific scenes of violence, the Gladneys look for reminders of death, the utmost state of abjection, and thus point out their need for reinforced psychological boundaries.

The proliferation of objects in the postmodern world presents a further challenge to the *selves* of DeLillo's fiction. Garbage, in particular, is given special attention in *White Noise* and *Underworld*. Thus these novels specifically foreground the abject, the thrown away, of our culture. In writing about *Underworld*, Mikko Keskinen explains,

> As the dark side of happy consumption of products, waste relates to death but also to transcendence and to the sublime. Waste is a reminder of the inevitable transience of most objects, including human beings. The itinerary of objects toward and finally across the border of waste is transgressive: by witnessing that process we become aware of the anxiety relating to denial, law, sin, and--fundamentally--death." (77)

By producing more and more products, capitalism produces more and more garbage. The individuals in the middle of that transaction are the consuming (eating) selves who throw away (excrete) the waste residue of our culture. The psychological relationship between

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break up the incessant bombardment of information. . . . Only a catastrophe gets our attention. . . . Mud slides, brush fires, coastal erosion, earthquakes, mass killings, et cetera" (66). This conversation seems echoed in Murray's later analysis of violent spectacle in movies: "I see these car crashes as part of a long tradition of American optimism. They are positive events. . . . It's a celebration. A reaffirmation of traditional values and beliefs. I connect car crashes to holidays like Thanksgiving and the Fourth. . . . Watch any car crash in any American movie. . . . There is a wonderful beaming spirit of innocence and fun" (218). In the midst of his humor here, DeLillo is suggesting the postmodern need for reminders of violence and death and thus of humans' own abject mortality. Or perhaps the opposing argument can also be made, that because they are so removed from selfhood as human subjects, these characters can watch violence and death without horror or fear but, instead, with a detached fascination.

ingesting food or merchandise as a means of warding off the awareness of death has been commented upon by numerous critics. In his discussion of *White Noise*, for example, William Little writes, "Commodifying waste as absolute negativity, postmodern culture inherits progressive culture's dialectical insistence that the negation (or elimination) of waste results in the realization of perfect positivity. According to this plot, refuse holds the promise of perfect re-fusal" (97). Little goes on to explain a pattern he notices in the novel:

> Frequently using the projection of a calamity, either in the air or on the air, as the haunting backdrop for a family meal, DeLillo joins anxiety about securing community and home as nonhazardous zones with anxiety about fashioning the body as a waste-free site, an innocent plot, a perfectly kept (up) property. By foregrounding food rituals in times of crisis, he raises the spectre of the ego's endless crisis of want. (99)[10]

This link suggests that the rise in consumer culture and the concomitant rise in conspicuous consumption is in part a result of an increased desire to repress the knowledge of death--the ultimate form of abjection. Individuals who believe (or need to believe) that they will live forever buy more products and thus produce more garbage. That people within a society can simultaneously imagine themselves as immortal through the purchase of commodities while also increasing their desire to view mediated forms of

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[10] Little also adds that *White Noise*

> dramatizes the complex rites of eating and buying that define consumer culture in order to spell out how such rituals are governed by a misguided progressivist faith in the ability to achieve a transcendent, perfectly possessed, waste-free state of self-realization. DeLillo's characters are either stuffing themselves or starving themselves, stocking up or cutting back . . . . Living in the desert of American excess, they alternately devour and

death and destruction again points out the startling ambivalence of abjection, its power both to terrorize subjects and to heighten their experience of being themselves.

One of Jack and Murray's faculty colleagues, Winnie Richards, is not sure this staggering bewilderment, this general abjection, is such a bad thing. Winnie is described as being particularly sensitive to contact with others, almost as if she is not armed with the postmodern protective gear that others wear to survive interaction. In Jack's description, "Perhaps the world of people and things had such an impact on her, struck her with the force of some rough and naked body--made her blush in fact--that she found it easier to avoid frequent contact" (185). When Jack talks to Winnie about Dylar and his wife's attempt to eliminate her fear of death, Winnie compares such fear to the effects produced in humans when they are confronted by a grizzly bear: "The sight of this grizzer is so electrifyingly strange that it gives you a renewed sense of yourself, a fresh awareness of the self--the self in terms of a unique and horrific situation. . . . The beast on hind legs has enabled you to see who you are as if for the first time, outside familiar surroundings, alone, distinct, whole" (229). Winnie finds such delineation of the human predicament to be a good thing, a self-defining and ultimately affirming experience. Thus she believes Dylar, if it even worked, would offer no benefit to people. She tells Jack, "I think it's a mistake to lose one's sense of death, even one's fear of death. Isn't death the boundary we need? Doesn't it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition? You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry of a final line, a border or limit"

> purge what the culture has conveniently labeled waste in a soteriological effort to eliminate the virtual wastefulness of death's absent meaning. (95)

(228-29). Her final words here emphasize how subjectivity is bounded and defined by the border of the abject, of the human corpse and the knowledge that all bodies have the final destination of death.

The two sides of Jack's life seem to illustrate Winnie's principle. Studying Hitler and the Nazis by day, Jack approaches his family with genuine warmth and appreciation. Constantly reminded of the deadly end points of fascism, spectacle, and mass-produced culture, the mundane details of his life become more meaningful to Jack: "It was these secondary levels of life . . . that made me believe we were a magic act, adults and children together, sharing unaccountable things" (34). Even an ordinary family dinner carries significance. He describes a meal as "a period of looks and glances, teeming interactions, part of the sensory array I ordinarily cherish. Heat, noise, lights, looks, words, gestures, personalities, appliances. A colloquial density that makes family life the one medium of sense knowledge in which an astonishment of heart is routinely contained" (117). And when it comes to his children, Jack uses a straightforward tone, remarkably free of parody, that he reserves for no other subject in his narrative, except perhaps Babette: "Watching children sleep makes me feel devout, part of a spiritual system. It is the closest I can come to God" (147). Specifically distinguishing his voice from the ironic tone he uses about so much else in life, Jack cautions, "Make no mistake. I take these children seriously. It is not possible to see too much in them, to overindulge your casual gift for the study of character. It is all there, in full force, charged waves of identity and being. There are no amateurs in the world of children" (103). His care for his family is presented, then, as something pure, unmediated, and free from the noise of culture.

Perhaps Jack's (and DeLillo's) clearest statement against the inevitable death of the postmodern self occurs when he becomes disturbed while thinking that Heinrich and the Dylar-popping Babette are sincere in believing that a person is no more than the sum of various brain waves and chemical interactions. Jack says to Babette, "We're the sum of our chemical impulses. Don't tell me this. It's unbearable to think about. . . . What happens to good and evil in this system? Passion, envy and hate? Do they become a tangle of neurons? Are you telling me that a whole tradition of human failings is now at an end, that cowardice, sadism, molestation are meaningless terms?" (200). Despite the way culture is trying to turn his children and friends into mass-produced consumers who believe only what the system wants them to believe, Jack Gladney illustrates the survival of the self in this suburban wasteland. In its use of abjection *White Noise* shows that while *becoming* abject may be the result of capitalist brainwashing (as in the case of Willie Mink), having an awareness of one's own *abjection* is a natural, necessary, and even positive dimension of human experience. Those surrounding Jack demonstrate the harms of postmodern society in their being seldom horrified or awe-struck by the abject. Yet, in remaining transfixed by the abject sides of human experience--natural and artificial disasters, piles of household garbage, the mystery of his own children--Jack shows that sensitivity toward these things is evidence that one is, in fact, still a thinking and feeling subject.

DeLillo depicts a world in which individual selfhood is threatened by forces pulling people towards an unnatural state of abjection, a state in which they are so programmed that they cease to be aware of themselves as hungering, loving, and dying creatures. This process can be elucidated by Joseph Conte's technical explanation of the

term "white noise." He writes, "it is at the higher intensities that we associate with the *abject* failure of the television picture tube or the radio signal that has made white noise a contemporary demon-in-the-machine" (118, italics mine). When technological devices are turned to their "higher intensities," white noise "creat[es] a frenetic distraction whose prolonged application could only be described as torture for the identity. Brain-washing. It seems there must be some point of transition in the intensity or frequency (low hum or high squeal) of white noise corresponding to brain waves in which the salutatory and open sound-space closes into a dense and mind-obliterating buzz" (119-20). The noise of culture thus may be understood to alter the identity, to brainwash, those fully tuned in to it. If human subjectivity is reinforced by contact or communication with an Other, then the damaging effects of ever-present postmodern technology can be seen in its purported ability to communicate as a recognizing "other," while not actually possessing a true Other's characteristics. As Conte puts it, "one should consider the effect that the anonymous, featureless qualities of white noise can have on the identity of the listener. White noise is a static background against which no figure, pattern, or signal is discernible" (120). Such an "Other" is not one which, allowing the self to stand in contrast, thus delineates it but, instead, is one which swallows the self into its own dizzying static. As is the case with so many of DeLillo's characters, identity (or selfhood) is diluted to the point of being negligible for those living in a culture saturated by white noise.

However, this philosophy--amounting to the postmodern death of the self--fails to account for the featured characters of *Great Jones Street* and *White Noise*. Bucky's and Jack's acute observations of the grotesque and pitifully abject characters around them

suggest that while DeLillo presents the death of the self as a theme of his fiction and as a potential tragedy within postmodern environments, he does not support the necessity of the poststructuralist conclusion. While many characters in his novels do have only shallow identities in an increasingly technological and mediated world, some maintain a psychological center that has no other term but the *self*.[11] Selvy and Oswald flatten under the pressures of capitalist government and power, but Bucky and Jack endure and still cling to the raft of selfhood. Surely DeLillo believes that there are enough human selves reading his fiction that they may choose to do the same.

[11] Curtis Yehnert writes perceptively of the mutually constituting forces of the individual and society in DeLillo's work: "Through these characters' strategies of self-creation, DeLillo presents, as the only viable site of resistance to postmodern obliteration, the postexistential self, a concept of subjectivity grounded not on a separation of psyche and socius but on a dialectic between form and formlessness." If selfhood is a carefully maintained balance between a distinct entity, the self, and a conglomeration of societal and group forces, then the permutations of selfhood are infinitely variable and endless. Yehnert believes that DeLillo uses characters who experience both "modernist" and "postmodernist" modes of selfhood, but finally, Yehnert argues, DeLillo advocates the mode of the "autonomous, existential individuals" in his fiction who "have accepted uncertainty and mediation, the responsibility for their own self-creation. They resist assimilation fully aware of their predicament: that they have no stable ground on which to stand but must stand anyway, that they have no guaranteed action to take but must act anyway. For DeLillo, this is the crux of human possibility."

"No more fiendish punishment could be devised . . . than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof." William James

CHAPTER FIVE

Loving Your Neighbor as Yourself: Racial Abjection in Toni Morrison's Fiction

In her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Toni Morrison writes that "[t]he trauma of racism, is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self, and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis" (381). Many of Morrison's novels succeed in making visible this wounded self through the portrayal of the "unspeakable." Her stories unflinchingly present people who are ostracized, neglected, abandoned, or perverse; those who limp, who are deformed, who mutilate themselves, who commit murder or suicide--all are presented as regular members of Morrison's fictional community.[1] Physically, emotionally, or socially abject, these characters ultimately misuse or abuse others, or themselves, because of this inner fragmentation produced by a white, racist society. Morrison is too complex a novelist, however, to connect race and selfhood according to one simple equation. Her stories also show a more complex relationship between selfhood and abjection: how a person abjected by the larger white society is also *subject to* a range of factors within their racial community; how the abject identity produced by racism is bad, but the abject edges of human nature are also necessary and, finally,

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[1] Lucille Fultz also comments on Morrison's tendency to feature characters who are in some way physically different: "In her fiction, the discourse surrounding the physically handicapped, those with maimed and warped bodies, is often direct and blunt. Through such directness Morrison forces us to look directly at those individuals--even those we find visually repulsive--and avoid euphemisms" (19). This use of physical deformation, I believe, helps Morrison point readers towards understanding the more subtle area of psychological deformation, or abjection, suffered by many of her characters.

inescapable. In the novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*, Morrison portrays characters who struggle with love, marriage, and parenting--ordinary sites of abjection--and who experience as well a racial abjection that is their birthright and burden in white society. The latter inevitably complicates the dynamics of the former.

Georges Bataille has recognized that a race can play the role of the abject in an entire society. He describes India's caste of the *untouchables* and explains that "being destitute is all it takes in these countries to create between the self and others . . . a nearly insuperable gap. The nauseating forms of dejection provoke a feeling of disgust so unbearable that it is improper to express or even to make allusion to it" (144). Furthermore, Bataille argues that in the United States, blacks have traditionally been cast into this role since capitalism was based on the "preliminary existence of a class held to be abject by common accord" (126). The concept of racial abjection is only now beginning to be applied to texts written by minorities.

The idea of the self damaged by the gaze from those who despise it is, for the most part, only expressed in African-American criticism. Even then, the discussion proceeds without examining the dynamics of feeling oneself *abject* and the implications for subjectivity. In *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, for example, Patricia Williams makes the following point:

> Very little in our language or culture encourages looking at others as parts of ourselves . . . [;] the distancing does not stop with the separation of the white self from the black other. In addition, the cultural domination of blacks by whites means that the black self is placed at a distance even

> from itself. . . . So blacks in a white society are conditioned from infancy to see in themselves only what others, who despise them, see. (62)

Much more can be done to trace this idea, along with the theoretical implications of abjection, in works by African-American and other minority writers.

The psychological damage produced by racism has been a much-noted feature of Morrison's work. Betty Jane Powell writes that "Morrison's major characters are spiritually and physically fragmented individuals who are disconnected from themselves, from each other, and from community" (105). In *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference*, Lucille Fultz argues that *The Bluest Eye* "calls into question the contemporaneous slogan 'Black is beautiful' and challenges readers to consider the seeds of black self-hatred, the demons within black psyches, and the culprits within the broader culture that contribute to black low self-esteem" (7). Discussing *Beloved*, Kristin Boudreau explains, "the novel seems to call attention to the pernicious flip side of a coin minted in the call and response tradition. If, for that tradition, self and community are mutually dependent and contingent . . . here we see that the self can be dissolved in that same space" (461). Similarly, Mary Jane Elliott points out that "denial and oppression of black identity by the larger slave-owning society" of *Beloved* "leads to an internalization of this colonizing discourse and subsequently to an inability for some and for others a constant struggle, to develop a self-empowered subjectivity when free from physical slavery" (181). As Peter McLaren puts it, "For those who are non-White, the seduction of whiteness can produce a self-definition that disconnects the subject from his or her history of oppression and struggle, exiling identity into the unmoored, chaotic realm of

abject Otherness" (Yancy 299).[2]

Morrison's own view of selfhood seems to be that it is neither a fixed locus nor a postmodern fiction but, rather, an evolving center of consciousness that is powerfully affected by its social conditioning. As George Yancy points out, "[f]or there to be someone like Pecola Breedlove presupposes the theorization of the self as a dynamic plasticity. In other words, for Morrison, it would seem, the self does not exist anterior to others; it is not a pre-given entity. The self is created and becomes *who* it is within a dialectical matrix that presupposes Otherness" (301-02). In Morrison's work the self is partially dependent for definition upon society, upon the eyes of others and the mirror of ideology, reflecting back to it*self* what it is. Identity rests somewhat in the eye of the beholder. In her novels this flexibility can be seen in black people's perceptions of others within their community. For example, according to Linden Peach, the idea of "the self as multiple, fluid and relational" is "reinforced in [*Sula*] by the changing nature of Sula's birthmark: to Nel it is a stemmed rose; to Jude, a copperhead and a rattlesnake; to Shadrack, a tadpole" (47). But the self's malleability can also, often more damagingly, be seen in the larger white culture's gaze internalized by black individuals. Thus Shelley Wong argues that the Breedloves' situation in *The Bluest Eye* "points up how a metaphysics, a socioeconomic system, a society and a community, can interact in a

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[2] Other critics echo these views. Fultz writes, "Morrison's fiction mirrors her search for metaphorical forms that assist African Americans in recovering their lost or diminished selves. These narratives present several characters--marginalized figures within an already marginal community--seeking to carve a space for themselves within the chronicles of their communities" (16). Denise Heinze, focusing on the potential harm of white standards of beauty, explains,

> Morrison Signifies [sic] upon the wholesale acceptance of the aesthetic of idealized beauty, one of the most dangerous of societal constructs because, by placing value on a very limited set of physical criteria, it can reduce human beings on sight to objects. Idealized beauty has the power to disenfranchise a child of mother love, to psychically

mutual frenzy of blind ideality to mutilate people, particularly girls and women" (477).

White society's power to reflect an abject recognition back to minorities is counterbalanced, however, by Morrison's belief in self-respect, in African-Americans' ability to love themselves and others. For instance, many of her damaged characters are reparented or enabled to give birth to a stronger self than the one reinforced by their culture. In fact, Morrison's faith in the value of fiction seems to depend on a belief in the vital selfhood of black people, whether or not that selfhood is externally validated: "We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with whom we have come in contact. We are not, in fact, 'other'" ("Unspeakable" 375). Lucille Fultz further explains Morrison's view:

> In her concern for identity politics, Morrison constructs the self as an interior space in relation to exterior features of difference. In constructing the psychic effects of difference as mediated in the desire for intersubjectivity, Morrison brings into sharper focus the efforts of those perceived as different to heal their psychic hurts by scrutinizing and acquiescing to or altering the conditions under which their difference marginalizes and/or alienates them. What is often overlooked, Morrison's narratives suggest, is the interior suffering of the subjects inside the manifest beings the public sees. (47)

Abjection is a useful way of discussing this psychological dimension of Morrison's

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splinter an entire race identity, and to imprison all human beings in static and stagnant relationships. (15)

fiction since it provides a language both for examining a subject's threat of engulfment or erasure as well as its potential for strengthening, differentiation, and integrity. Understanding how characters internalize the negative recognition produced by racism is an important part of interpreting these characters' motivations. All human selves must negotiate the borders of the abject but African-Americans, Morrison seems to argue, must also negotiate a society that seeks to cast them aside since it equates them with the abject itself. For Morrison's characters and her readers, resistance to the larger forces of racism in society can be assisted by understanding the internalized identification with abjection that blacks need to resist within themselves.

Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, explores the damage done to black women in a society that worships white beauty. The novel earns its title from the impulses of two black girls: Pecola, who prays that her eyes will turn blue so she can be lovable, and Claudia, who hates the blue eyes of the white dolls that she is given at Christmas. While both are harmed by the dictates of white society, Claudia's loving upbringing gives her the ability to take a psychological stand against being *subject* to prejudice, whereas Pecola's childhood of abuse further enforces her abject identity.

Claudia remembers her mother as harsh but loving. A raw look at physical abjection appears in nearly the first scene, when Claudia is sick and describes her own vomit: "The puke swaddles down the pillow onto the sheet--green-gray, with flecks of orange. It moves like the insides of an uncooked egg. Stubbornly clinging to its own mass, refusing to break up and be removed. How, I wonder, can it be so neat and nasty at the same time?" (13). (Her question here subtly poses Morrison's own about human nature.) Claudia then recalls her mother's rough manner: "My mother's voice drones on.

She is not talking to me. She is talking to the puke, but she is calling it my name: Claudia" (13). While she remembers crying and fearing that her mother was mad at her for being sick, Claudia also remembers that someone came into her room during the night, repositioned her blankets, and put salve on her chest. In remembering that autumn, she now describes her mother's harsh manner as "a productive and fructifying pain. Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup" (14).

Claudia also recalls being angry as a child at the way America gawked over little white girls like Shirley Temple. She wondered, "What made people look at them and say, 'Awwwww,' but not for me?" (22). She is even more disgusted that her mother would give her white baby dolls which she was supposed to love and play with, as if she agreed with the judgment of America and the toy manufacturers that white truly was cuter. Instead of accepting white culture's estimation of beauty, however, Claudia is a strong enough child to have very definite opinions of her own. Of Raggedy Ann, she says, "I was physically revolted by and secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair" (20). Instead of treasuring her blond Christmas dolls, she resolves to destroy them: "I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. . . . I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. Break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around" (20). Claudia reacts violently to a toy's associated suggestion that her own physical features are less than ideal. By dismembering a white doll, she contradicts white notions of aesthetics while at the same time strengthening her own sense of agency and freedom. Patrice Cormier-Hamilton

emphasizes this scene, saying, "When Claudia destroys her white doll with its glassy blue eyes, she demonstrates pride in her identity and the ability to understand, to some degree, the repressive values pervading her black community" (121). These "repressive values" are difficult to combat, however, as George Yancy points out: "'You are ugly people,' when applied to black people, carries an epistemic truth-value within a white discursive paradigm that already comes replete with its own stipulated criteria for what constitutes beauty" (310). Even Claudia admits that she will succumb to white notions of beauty as she gets older.

According to Sartre, this cultural standard of beauty even qualifies as a form of enslavement: "I am a slave to the degree that my being is dependent at the center of a freedom which is not mine and which is the very condition of my being. In so far as I am the object of values which come to qualify me without my being able to act on this qualification or even to know it, I am enslaved" (243). Although society's standards for beauty are often a source of oppression for white girls as well, Morrison seems to emphasize that African-American children may grow up with a more damaging baseline assumption of their ugliness and despair at having no chance of meeting the cultural standard.

Claudia recalls how life changes for her and her sister, Frieda, when Pecola comes to live with them. She remembers her realization that although her family is far from the American ideal of beauty and wealth, there are people worse off than she is:

> Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment. Our peripheral

> existence, however, was something we had learned to deal with--probably because it was abstract. But the concreteness of being outdoors was another matter. (18)

"Being outdoors" describes Pecola's homeless state when she comes to live at Claudia's house. Pecola suffers from the reputation of her family, and particularly of her father, in being the lowest in this black community. As Claudia puts it, "Cholly Breedlove, then, a renting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was, indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger" (19). Fulfilling all of the worst stereotypes reflecting blacks' inferior existence, Pecola's father carries the shame of a community that does not want to acknowledge its tie to him. Just as Jim Holbrook in *Yonnondio* is associated with animals because of his demeaning jobs, Cholly's abject status is described with animal metaphors.

Even prior to this disgrace of being "put outdoors," however, the Breedloves' meager storefront home reflects their poverty and abject identity. Their furnishings are old and run-down: "The furniture had aged without ever having become familiar. People had owned it, but never known it" (31). The continued description of the furniture applies to the depersonalized children growing up at the Breedloves' as well: "[Y]ou couldn't take any joy in owning it. And the joylessness stank, pervading everything. The stink of it kept you from painting the beaverboard walls; from getting a matching piece of material for the chair; even from sewing up the split, which became a gash, which became a gaping chasm that exposed the cheap frame and cheaper upholstery" (32). Just as the Breedloves' household is treated with neither pride nor a sense of belonging, Pecola and her brother Sammy grow up with a sense of neglect and inherited ugliness.

As the narrator explains,

> It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. "Yes," they had said. "You are right." And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (34)

Morrison imaginatively depicts the way an abject identity is assigned and accepted. Growing up in such circumstances, feeling like a torn piece of used furniture, Pecola is treated as ragged and unpolished by others in her community.

In his article "The Black Self Within a Semiotic Space of Whiteness," George Yancy discusses the way Pecola is born into an environment that already has a story for her and assigns her a character role fitting that story. "Pecola's identity," he writes, "is dynamically constituted and shaped by an already existing racist narrative, one that constructs her as the wretched of the earth" (302). This identity is absorbed when, "[a]s a delicate and inquisitive child, Pecola will learn to 'read' the negative facial, tactile, and verbal cues exhibited by her mother, cues that she will then use to negatively sculpture her own identity" (314). As Laing explains, "Whatever its particular subsequent vicissitudes, however, one's identity is in the first instance conferred on one. We discover who we already are" (*Others* 84). In being born into her family, to parents already looked down upon in this community, Pecola joins a story that is already being

written and has assigned her a particular sort of role.

Pecola does wonder why society thinks she is ugly. She wonders why Mr. Yacobowski, the neighborhood grocer, seems to look straight through her. Furthermore, "this vacuum is not new to her. . . . She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people" (42). The boys who tease her at school, however, share her racial identity. As the narrator explains, boys who are mean to Pecola "seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn" (55). Pecola cannot distinguish the boys' hatred of themselves from their taunts directed at her. Instead, she easily accepts her "ugliness" because it is reinforced everywhere she turns. In a sad distortion of Lacan's mirror phase, "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (39). Pecola's abjection is furthered by this unsettling of her self-image. Any vestige of self-esteem she had is erased as she learns to look at herself with the same distorted gaze with which others look upon her. According to Lucille Fultz, when Pecola looks in the mirror, "[t]his moment marks a complex contemplation of identity in that the mirror refracts the multiple self-images Pecola has internalized through the lenses of other" (56). Pecola's thoughts also reveal the despair of a thoroughly accepted abjection: "Please, God, . . . Please make me disappear" (39). Since no one will *look* at Pecola, she no longer wants to be able to look at herself.[3] The

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[3] Fultz further explains how thoroughly Pecola's self-image has been affected by the attitudes of others toward her:

> What Pecola discerns from the mirror is a self fractured by these varied gazes. The fights between her parents fuse these images and mobilize her desire for blue eyes, not so much by her own conviction that she is ugly, but by the projection of her self through the eyes

loathing she identifies in others' recognition of her is absorbed and applied to her*self*.

Unlike everyone else in their community, Claudia and her sister care about Pecola. They want to help her but realize that the girl's problems extend beyond what can be fixed by friendship. Seeing Pecola suffer others' cruel treatment at school, Claudia says Pecola "seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing. Her pain antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets. But she held it in where it could lap up into her eyes" (61). Claudia wants to pass on the self-confidence and strength of identity that would allow Pecola to stand up to others' image of her, to fight back and assert her own worth. Claudia cannot imagine what it was like to grow up in the Breedloves' home, however. The closest she can come is her shock in hearing Pecola's pitiful question one night, revealing how lonely and uncared for she is: "Then Pecola asked a question that had never entered my mind. 'How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?'" (29).

Pecola's parents, Cholly and Pauline Breedlove, are two wounded people who have no real love to give each other and no love to give their children. As Jane Bakerman points out, "they do not know how to love; and they cannot give their children a sense of self, for they have none of their own" (544). Pauline grew up in Alabama, the ninth of eleven children. Her quick marriage to Cholly is attributed as much to her need for escape and to the fact that Cholly just happened to come along as it may be attributed to love. Early in their marriage, Pauline spends many days going to the movies where

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of others. How does a young girl, in the process of developing an identity and formulating a self, best see and know herself except through socialization and interaction

she absorbs white standards of beauty and develops a quiet loathing for her husband and children's appearance. In doing so, she enacts what Patrice Cormier-Hamilton describes: "By subscribing to a false white standard of beauty, African Americans assist the repressive efforts of the majority culture and bury their identities, following an unhealthy path of self-hatred rather than self-love" (116). To complicate matters further, Pauline self-righteously counts any failing of Cholly's as further proof of what a noble woman she is by remaining married to him: "[S]he avenged herself on Cholly by forcing him to indulge in the weaknesses she despised. . . . Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross" (100). Pauline ends up working for a white family whose children she treats with more affection than she does her own. For instance, at work she enjoys bathing the white girl whom she "dried in fluffy white towels and put in cuddly clothes. Then she brushed the yellow hair and felt the slip of it between her fingers" (101). Pauline's own children and husband only call her Mrs. Breedlove, but the family who employs her gives her a nickname--Polly. The use of names alone indicates where the love lies.

Cholly, in turn, brings his own set of problems to the marriage. His first sexual experience was interrupted by voyeuristic white hunters, armed with rifles, who ordered him, "Get on wid it. An' make it good, nigger, make it good" (117). In that moment Cholly's hatred for the white hunters is transferred to the girl he is with: "He hated her. He almost wished he could do it--hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much" (117). Terry Otten explains that in Cholly, Morrison "characterizes a quest and capacity for love malformed and wrenched by the viciousness of a white-dominated culture that perverts

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with others?" (58-59)

its every expression" (653). In the leers of the white hunters, Cholly comes to recognize his identity as someone who is viewed not as a person but as a black body the ugliness of which is only made more sensational by its supposedly outstanding sexual performance. His internalized hatred is later directed toward Pauline. Cholly accepts, perhaps welcomes, the fact that his wife is "one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt. He poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires. Hating her, he could leave himself intact" (37). Cholly avoids the pain of his own racial subjection by projecting his self-loathing onto his wife.

While Cholly is unsuccessful as a husband, he is even more inadequate as a father. Abandoned by his mother to be raised by a great aunt, he grows up feeling like an orphan. When it comes to being a parent himself, Cholly has no positive example from which to draw: "[T]he aspect of married life that dumbfounded him and rendered him totally disfunctional was the appearance of children. Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be" (126). In a heart-wrenching, grotesque scene, Cholly struggles with his inability to know how to love his daughter. When he walks into the kitchen and sees eleven-year-old Pecola washing dishes, Cholly is struck with the realization that his daughter is not happy. He wants to make her happy and is angry that he does not know how: "What could he do for her--ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? If he looked into her face, he would see those haunted, loving eyes. The hauntedness would irritate him--the love would move him to fury" (127). In a

fit of extremely confused emotion, Cholly rapes Pecola.[4]

Pecola's eventual loss of selfhood results from her repeated victimization. Her already frail subjectivity, suffering from an upbringing of neglect, is further wounded by the lack of positive recognition she receives. As Patrice Cormier-Hamilton explains, "Pecola behaves like a victim because she has been victimized on three debilitating fronts from the moment of her birth: by the majority white society, by the black community, and later by herself" (121). Similarly, Denise Heinze writes that "Pecola, victimized from within and without, has no family or community to insulate her from or fortify her against the ideology of beauty and wealth that treats plain black girls like disposable diapers" (69). Heinze's description is especially appropriate here, since the image of "disposable diapers" captures both the throw-away status of the abject and its relationship to excrement. Being disposed of by her parents, Pecola seeks affirmation elsewhere. As Lucille Fultz points out, "a number of scenes reveal Pecola's self-conscious and direct attempts to change her position from that of an objectified other to that of a subject and an agent as she searches for a replacement for the tortured self she has learned to associate with her blackness" (56). These efforts are perhaps best seen in Pecola's interaction with two other outsiders in her community.

The first occurs when Junior, a boy who lives next door to her school, pretends he wants to befriend Pecola only to throw a kitten in her face. The narrator's extensive description of Junior and especially of his mother, Geraldine, shows another important contrast to the family in which Pecola grows up: "Geraldine did not allow her baby,

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[4] Linden Peach points out that "When Cholly approaches his daughter he does so crawling on all fours like a child or the animal which whites have made him feel. Nibbling the back of her leg he regresses into the

Junior, to cry. As long as his needs were physical, she could meet them--comfort and satiety. He was always brushed, bathed, oiled, and shod. Geraldine did not talk to him, coo to him, or indulge him in kissing bouts, but she saw that every other desire was fulfilled" (71). The opposite of Emily in "I Stand Here Ironing," Junior is the epitome of the well-parented child, if "parenting" means attending to perfect physical care and cleanliness. Geraldine herself is characterized as the epitome of "how to behave." Her manners demonstrate "the careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners." She has succeeded in knowing "how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (68).

"Funkiness" here seems to represent the edges of abjection--the extremes and messiness of human life that is sometimes more closely linked to black (funky, dirty, impolite) culture than to white (proper, clean, decorous) culture. Like Tweedy Browner in *White Noise*, Geraldine's behavior reveals her pathological fear of the abject. According to Heinze, "Cleanliness becomes an obsession that infects every area of her life including sex, which is a filthy necessity not to be enjoyed, and mother love, which keeps a child clean but not cuddled. In her aspiration for acceptance, Geraldine has relinquished the pleasures and very essence of life" (70). Morrison makes Junior, in turn, a social outcast who torments little girls because his parents want him kept away from the black boys who curse and spit. Geraldine also becomes the villain who embodies her community's worst treatment of Pecola: "'Get out,' she said, her voice quiet. 'You nasty

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most primal of experiences, while his closed eyes suggest how he is unable to see the full moral implications of what he is doing" (37).

little black bitch. Get out of my house'" (75). Providing a dramatic portrayal of the abject being expelled, Geraldine here creates a physical boundary against the abject by shutting her door in Pecola's face. This girl is the embodiment of the abject for Geraldine and thus the reason she produces such strong loathing in her. As Heinze explains,

> Pecola becomes the enemy--the dirt, the ignorance, the silence, the needfulness, the history--that which must be stamped out in Geraldine's life. Representing all that Geraldine is ashamed of and which she fights so desperately not to be, Pecola's presence in the house is the ultimate transgression. . . . There is no love for Pecola in Geraldine's house because the woman has no love for herself. (71)

While Cholly's rape of his daughter is initiated by an impulse of love, Geraldine's scolding reflects the pure shame and hatred she feels for any reminder of her own nearness to abject blackness.

Pecola's other outside contact in the community is Soaphead Church, the strange medicine man who, like Geraldine, has a distinct loathing of the human abject. Soaphead is first presented as a misanthrope: "Once there was an old man who loved things, for the slightest contact with people produced in him a faint but persistent nausea" (130). Further description reveals his hatred as specifically linked to what is humanly physical: "The residue of the human spirit smeared on inanimate objects was all he could withstand of humanity. . . . He abhorred flesh on flesh. Body odor, breath odor, overwhelmed him. The sight of dried matter in the corner of the eye, decayed or missing teeth, ear wax, blackheads, moles, blisters, skin crusts--all the natural excretions and protections the

body was capable of--disquieted him" (131). The ugly, dirty Pecola must have been quite a sight for the sensitive man. Morrison's thorough list of the body's abject matter again recalls Kristeva's description of the abject as what is both me and not-me: "[F]ilth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a *boundary* and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin" (*Powers* 69).

Since Soaphead is known as a former preacher and magic man, Pecola approaches him to ask for blue eyes. Her simple faith is contrasted with his extended letter to God, asking for Pecola's request but also telling God that He has made a mistake in letting a girl like Pecola be so abused. He tells God, "I did what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played You" (143). Claiming that he has given Pecola positive recognition that she so desperately needs, Soaphead's prayer reflects a psychoanalytic approach to human development: love that is preceded by a look. In a sense Soaphead is successful in granting her wish. Pecola leaves thinking that her eyes have turned blue, but she ends up losing her mind. Claudia overhears a conversation Pecola has with herself: "Every time I look at somebody, they look off" (151). "You are the only one who tells me how pretty they are. . . . You are a real friend. . . . No. Really. You are my very best friend. Why didn't I know you before?" (152). Pecola's belief in the blue-eye miracle also apparently solidifies a fragmentation of her self. After her father rapes her, she has his baby, and the baby dies, she ends up living in a delusional world in which the only love she experiences comes from a relationship with her own split-off self.

Claudia's final memory of Pecola emphasizes not only her abjection but also the

role of the abject she played in relationship to the entire community. Pecola ends up living with her mother,

> among all the waste and beauty of the world--which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us--all who knew her--felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. . . . We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (159)

Claudia recognizes Pecola as an abject figure, one who symbolically takes on the discrimination and pain faced by the African-Americans surrounding her. They channel towards Pecola the self-loathing and disgust society tells them to feel about themselves. Morrison reveals, then, an understanding of how the abject may be used in an attempt to determine and solidify subjectivity: in this case, one girl acts as an abject sacrifice to boost the selfhood of an entire community. Claudia's attitude as narrator, however, suggests that even if such a transaction could permanently work, it remains an inhumane sacrifice of a little girl.

Sula, Morrison's second novel, is about the friendship of Nel Wright and Sula Peace and about how the black community of Medallion, Ohio, fears the unconventional and unmarried Sula. Nel and Sula are raised in very different households. Nel's is orderly, controlled, and sterile. When Nel's mother, Helene, adopts a submissive, ingratiating attitude toward a white train conductor, the moment is presented as significant in Nel's own identity formation: "An eagerness to please and an apology for

living met in [Helene's] voice. . . . Like a street pup that wags its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moments before, Helene smiled" (20, 21). From her mother, Nel learns to quietly despise her own blackness. The message is conveyed both in public and at home, where Helene scolds her daughter saying, "Don't just sit there, honey. You could be pulling your nose . . ." to make it thinner (28). Despite these negative messages, after their train trip south Nel stares into the mirror and feels an enlarged sense of herself: "She got out of bed and lit the lamp to look in the mirror. There was her face, plain brown eyes, three braids and the nose her mother hated. She looked for a long time and suddenly a shiver ran through her. 'I'm me,' she whispered. 'Me.' . . . Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear" (28). Linden Peach emphasizes a more negative reading of this scene, however, pointing out that in *Sula*, "the behaviours of individuals within the black community are made complex and problematic by its unnatural relationship to an engulfing white society. Nel's 'me-ness' develops only after seeing her mother Helene's experience of being black in the larger white society" (43). Still, Nel does gain a sense of belonging to herself that Sula will never understand.

Sula lives with her grandmother, Eva, and mother, Hannah, in an oddly built house filled with several boarders Eva has taken in. It is a chaotic house where love is present but sparse. Eva's own losses and difficulties sent her into a survival mode decades ago--one in which she still seems to be operating. After her husband left her to raise toddlers on her own, she disappeared for awhile and returned with only one leg; rumors suggested that she "stuck it under a train and made them pay off" or that "she sold it to a hospital for $10,000" (31). In either case, it seems that Eva resorted to abject

mutilation of her own body as a last resort to find income for her family. When Hannah wonders about her upbringing and asks Eva whether she really loved her, Eva responds in anger:

> "You settin' here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn't."
>
> "I didn't mean that, Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin' 'bout something else. Like. Like. Playin' with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?" (68)

> "You want me to tinkle you under the jaw and forget 'bout them sores in your mouth? Pearl was shittin' worms and I was supposed to play rang-around-the-rosie?"
>
> "But Mamma, they had to be some time when you wasn' thinkin' 'bout. . ."
>
> "No time. They wasn't no time . . . [;] what you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?" (69)

Eva's harsh response is one that would probably be understood by many parents in Morrison's fiction and in Olsen's as well. Doing the best they can to survive in a society that treats them as second-class citizens or worse, these mothers and fathers struggle to meet the material needs of the children, often not having the time, energy, or inner strength to meet psychological or emotional needs.

Eva's maternal hardness is further revealed when readers learn that she set her son, Plum, on fire. After he returned from World War I addicted to drugs, she had recurring dreams that he wanted to crawl back into her womb and be a baby again. Since Eva is convinced that Plum will only lead the life of an infant and will continue refusing to accept an adult's life of responsibility, she feels she must act: "I would have done it, would have let him if I'd've had the room but a big man can't be a baby all wrapped up inside his mamma no more; he suffocate. I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out" (72).

Hannah is horrified to hear that her mother in fact murdered her brother. But Eva presents the facts plainly, in an odd voice slightly disassociated from herself, revealing her own psychological splitting: "When Eva spoke at last it was with two voices. Like two people were talking at the same time, saying the same thing, one a fraction of a second behind the other" (71). Eva's distant mothering is presented as a cause of Hannah's habits with men: Hannah had sex often, and often with anyone who was available. The pain inflicted by her mother is passed down when Sula overhears her telling a friend: "I love Sula. I just don't like her" (57). When Hannah later catches on fire herself and Eva jumps out of a window trying to save her, Sula is discovered to be standing on the porch, watching her mother burn to death without doing anything to put out the fire. The lack of warmth Sula received from her mother becomes evident in her own expressed indifference while watching Hannah suffer. Laing's description of the mother's importance is relevant here: "It seems that loss of the mother, at a certain stage, threatens the individual with loss of his self. The mother, however, is not simply a *thing* which the child can see, but a *person* who sees the child. Therefore, we suggest that a

necessary component in the development of the self is the experience of oneself as a person under the loving eye of the mother" (*Divided* 125). Having failed to receive this recognition in childhood, Sula becomes a person with damaged subjectivity whose indifferent actions will bring further harm to others.

When Nel and Sula meet, they discover that they complement each other. Sula's wildness is balanced by Nel's sense of decorum. When boys are harassing Nel on her way home from school, Sula slashes off the tip of her left forefinger to demonstrate that she is an unstable element who should be feared. Imitating Eva's mutilation of her own leg, with this act Sula reveals a detached relationship to her own body even as a child. In other ways, however, the girls bond through mutuality:

> Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers . . . they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (52)

Reinforcing each other's selfhood in a community wherein black boys were bullies and black girls had no status, Nel and Sula function as mothers to each other. In one scene while playing outdoors, they help each other literally to bury the abject. After carving out a hole in the ground with sticks, they begin to throw garbage into it: "Each then looked around for more debris to throw into the hole: paper, bits of glass, butts of cigarettes, until all of the small defiling things they could find were collected there" (59). This scene, their burying "small defiling things," serves as an enactment of abjection and

as further reinforcement of the positive self-mirroring they see in each other's eyes. In their intense mutuality, the girls illustrate Kristeva's description of the "struggle, which fashions the human being, the *mimesis*, by means of which he becomes homologous to another in order to become himself" (*Powers* 13). Their bonding continues, however, to the point that "their friendship was so close, they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's" (83). This ultimate lack of boundaries between Nel and Sula portrays the fragile basis of each girl's self-definition and foreshadows their pain to come.

Not surprisingly, adulthood changes their friendship. Nel's traditional upbringing prepares her for a traditional wedding. The psychological dynamics of her marriage to Jude are foreshadowed when the narrator says, "The two of them together would make one Jude. . . . Jude could see himself taking shape in her eyes" (83). Accepting sexist standards for how a woman's subjectivity is to become *subject to* her husband, Nel partially sacrifices the selfhood Sula helped her to achieve. Sula, on the other hand, leaves town for ten years, then returns "[a]ccompanied by a plague of robins." Following her return, the people in Medallion "couldn't go anywhere without stepping in [the robins'] pearly shit, and it was hard to hang up clothes, pull weeds or just sit on the front porch when robins were flying and dying all around you" (89). Sula's reappearance is thus associated with the abject matter of bird excrement and death, foreshadowing the trouble she will cause to her community and particularly to her best friend. When Eva expresses concern that Sula, at age thirty, is not yet married, Sula's reply gives further evidence of her rebellion against convention: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself." Eva tells her that is "[s]elfish. Ain't no woman got no business

floatin' around without no man" (92). Like her mother, Sula prefers to spend short periods of time with multiple men. Sula's behavior increasingly demonstrates Kristeva's description of the abject as a challenge to boundaries: "The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them. . . . [I]t curbs the other's suffering for its own profit" (*Powers* 15).

Sula perhaps best illustrates this when she sleeps with Nel's husband, Jude, and sees no problem with her action. When Jude then leaves Nel and Nel's world falls apart, Sula is disappointed that her friend has become just another woman acting like a typical wife. Robert Grant points out that "For Nel, the loss of Jude initiates a radical identity trauma, a disorientation of the complacent, socialized self" (99). With this loss, she experiences an overwhelming grief that threatens to undo her selfhood. Sitting on the bathroom floor, Nel processes her grief by thinking about a series of surfaces where life borders the abject: "If I could be sure that I could stay here in this small white room with the dirty tile and water gurgling in the pipes and my head on the cool rim of this bathtub and never have to go out the door, I would be happy. If I could be certain that I never had to get up and flush the toilet, go in the kitchen, watch my children grow up and die, see my food chewed on my plate . . ." (108). When she picks herself up and rejoins the routine of her life, Nel is left with "nothing, just a flake of something dry and nasty in her throat" (108). However, she notices that something is present with her, then, wherever she goes: "There was something just to the right of her, in the air, just out of view. She could not see it, but she knew exactly what it looked like. A gray ball hovering just there. Just there. To the right. Quiet, gray, dirty. A ball of muddy strings, but without weight,

fluffy but terrible in its malevolence" (108-09). Though Nel is horrified that the object continues to hover next to her, she is equally determined not to acknowledge or look at it, fearing what it might do to her: "It just floated there for the seeing, if she wanted to, and O my God for the touching if she wanted to. But she didn't want to see it, ever, for if she saw it, who could tell but what she might actually touch it, or want to, and then what would happen if she actually reached out her hand and touched it? Die probably, but no worse than that" (110). Morrison seems to depict a tangible representation of the abject that has nothing to do with race--the tempting yet horrifying mass of ugliness and emotion that must be repressed because acknowledging it would threaten to undo the self.

In the character of Sula, Morrison creates a person whose actions at times are difficult to account for. What the narrator does explain is that Sula felt "no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her" (118). Hearing her mother say she didn't like her "taught [Sula] there was no other that you could count on," and having "no ego . . . she felt no compulsion to verify herself--be consistent with herself" (118-19). Lacking a stable relationship with herself, Sula is ironically self-centered and unable to relate consistently to others. She puts the able-bodied Eva into a nursing home without reason and wounds Nel, her only real friend, in the deepest way possible. Already shunned by her community for her strange clothing and behavior, she is further ostracized by the people of Medallion for her treatment of Eva and Nel.[5] Sula does appear to

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[5] Peach describes Sula as "sharing characteristics with the traditional African trickster, [who] challenges the community," adding that "there is a kaleidoscopic model of self and behaviour in the novel which confounds attempts to read it in terms of a binary structure or traditional, unified models of self" (54).

In her article "The Convergence of Feminism and Ethnicity in the Fiction of Toni Morrison," Carolyn Denard looks at Sula and Jadine (from Morrison's *Tar Baby*) in light not only of racial restrictions but also according to the limits often placed on females during this time period: "These characters especially resent the black woman's acceptance of this role for herself. Thus even at the risk of distancing

become traumatically shocked when she realizes, after Nel's confrontation, how much she has hurt her: "She had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing" (119). The implication is that Sula, in fact, thought she and Nel *were* the same thing. Thus perhaps she felt that since Jude belonged to Nel, he belonged to her as well. Apparently even as an adult, she has not achieved the individuation that Laing describes: "The capacity to experience oneself as autonomous means that one has really come to realize that one is a separate person from everyone else. No matter how deeply I am committed in joy or suffering to someone else, he is not me, and I am not him" (*Divided* 55). Shortly after Nel visits, Sula dies from what seems to be an overdose of medicine, lying alone in the fetal position on Eva's bed. Lizabeth Rand points out interesting similarities between Sula and Eva: "[B]oth use extreme measures--severing parts of themselves--to serve notice that they will survive and remain as 'whole' as possible. . . . Ironically, both women spend their final years alone and completely 'dis-membered'--cut off from one another and from the familial connection they share" (346-47).

Clearly, Sula demonstrates an unstable subjectivity, both in her relationships with her community and loved ones as well as in her infantile understanding of a self's relationship to others. Deborah McDowell writes that "The novel invokes oppositions of

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themselves from other black women, they seek to assert a sense of self defined outside of the parameters set for women by the black community as well as by the society at large" (173). Sula's experience during her ten years away from Medallion, Denard argues, probably taught her a great deal: "The passive resignation of the women of Medallion, she finds, is a lesser evil than the racism outside of it" (174). In the larger society, since "[t]he only black women who could enjoy the free-spirited life that Sula desires without consequence were 'show business women,' . . [;] whatever rebellion she chooses to engage in was ultimately restricted to the boundaries of her ethnic community" (174). Even Sula's non-conformist personality is dependent for definition upon a community who will actually recognize her and care about her actions.

good/evil, virgin/whore, self/other, but moves beyond them, avoiding the false choices they imply and dictate" (80). This idea can be seen in the way Sula's identity continues to be linked with Nel's even as the novel ends. When Nel visits Eva at the nursing home, the old woman says, "You. Sula. What's the difference" and "Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you" (168, 169). These statements seem incredible when put next to the plot-lines of each character.[6] Perhaps Morrison, like Nabokov, is questioning the traditional stability of selfhood and suggesting the power of mutual identification, even in polarized opposites, that comes from a friendship like Sula and Nel's.

Two psychological interpretations of the novel, I believe, are useful in relating Sula to abjection. Naana Baniyiwa-Horne resolves the odd linking of Sula and Nel, saying, "What happens to the two friends is equivalent to the dislocation that occurs when there is a split between one's conscious and unconscious selves" (30). As she reads the ending of the novel, Sula's death brings to Nel "the realization that in her persistent struggle to be the epitome of conventional respectability, she has buried a vital part of herself. To become a whole person again, she must resurrect that buried part. Nel's heart-rending cry for her dead friend, at the end of the novel, is, therefore, a symbolic weeping for that lost part of herself" (29). The character of Sula, Baniyiwa-Horne argues, "is not a realistic portrayal of womanhood but an exploration of that dimension of

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[6] McDowell further explains that "while Sula and Nel are represented as two parts of a self, those parts are distinct: they are complementary, not identical. Although Sula and Nel might share a common vision (suggested by 'one eye'), their needs and desires are distinct (they have 'two throats')" (81). When Eva identifies Nel and Sula as "Just alike," according to McDowell, "[a]fter years of repression, Nel must own her complicity in Chicken Little's drowning, a complicity that is both sign and symbol of the disowned piece of herself. . . . That remembrance makes space for Nel's psychic reconnection with Sula as a friend as well as symbol of that disowned self" (85).

the feminine psyche or self which is often hidden from view because it is scary and too problematic to deal with" (28). This invocation of fear and the idea that something is too "scary" to deal with recalls Kristeva's concept of "horror" as well as the abject's association with the traditionally conceived "bad self" of the feminine.

Similarly, Robert Grant discusses *Sula* by pointing out that "the putative focus of the text is a 'sociopathic' enigma, a character who is not clearly, in the psychological and psychoanalytical sense of the term, a coherent or unified Subject. Beyond this *Sula*, as a novel[,] is seemingly without a 'subject,' in that familiar sense in which the term is used" (95). Grant's use of the word "seemingly" is intentional here, for while it may seem easy to conclude that Sula has no coherent self at all, he makes an important distinction:

> Sula is not as autonomous existentially as she appears, and we note how Morrison takes pains to underline the fact that for all of her refreshing bravado she is an "unfinished" woman, an entity who may not need a primary relationship but who does need *to be in a relationship to* something or someone. . . . On a deeper level, Sula . . . inchoately understands and responds to the process by which iconoclastic individuals and preservative communities define and "identify" themselves *against* each other. Thus she fashions and sustains her unique identity as a "rebel" only, and necessarily, in connection with the fairly orthodox and enclosed community of the Bottom. (98-99)

Like the treatment of Pecola, then, the community's loathing of Sula reinforces its identity as good, proper, and, most importantly, as *not* like her. When Sula returns to town after her long absence, the threat her presence carries causes those around her to

strengthen their own relationships temporarily: "Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst" (117-18). In contrast, after Sula's death,

> mothers who had defended their children from Sula's malevolence . . . now had nothing to rub up against. The tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made. Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair. . . . [T]hey returned to a steeping resentment of the burdens of old people. Wives uncoddled their husbands; there seemed no further need to reinforce their vanity. (153-54)

Sula carries the power and threat of the abject, challenging the integrity and boundaries of her community with her own lawlessness and unbridled self-centeredness. Ironically, though rejected herself, her presence helps others become more cohesive in their relationships with each other through their opposition to being in relationship with her. Just as an awareness of the abject serves a positive psychological purpose for DeLillo's characters, an awareness of the abject strengthens relational ties in this community. Appropriate to her identification with abjection, Sula remains a disturbingly ambivalent character in the novel, one whom readers can either hate or sympathize with, judge harshly or love.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison again introduces an assortment of abject figures. In many ways, the novel is the story of the main character, Milkman's, own psychological development, his growth into selfhood and acceptance of his responsibility

to others.[7]

At the same time, the female characters of *Song of Solomon* also enact significant patterns of abjection. As Charles Scruggs points out, many of the characters "hold on to their desires until they themselves become grotesques, or until they make grotesques out of others, often those they love" (312). Milkman's mother Ruth is a prime example of this. Raised only by her father, Ruth has a spoiled but lonely childhood. She becomes unnaturally close to her father; she tells Milkman, "I didn't think I'd ever need a friend because I had him" and that he was "the only person who ever really cared whether I lived or died" (124). After marrying Macon, Ruth's bond with her father drives a wedge in the marriage. When her father dies and Macon discovers Ruth lying in bed with his corpse, sucking on his fingers, their marriage is permanently harmed. Ruth's grotesque love is further evinced in the behavior that gives Milkman his nickname--her nursing him until "his legs dangled almost to the floor" (13).

Ruth becomes a sympathetic character, however, as Macon abuses her both verbally and physically. Consumed with his business and uncaring towards his children, Macon's "hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her" (10). Despised by her husband and treated coldly by her children, Ruth depends on a water-mark on a piece of furniture to secure her identity. Each day, she notes the mark on a mahogany table; "she regarded it as a mooring, a checkpoint, some stable visual object that assured her that the world was still there" and as a reminder that "she was alive somewhere, inside" (11). Instead of receiving positive confirmation of her identity in the

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[7] A thorough analysis of Milkman's psychological development can be found in Eleanor Branch's "Through the Maze of the Oedipal: Milkman's Search for Self in *Song of Solomon*," *Literature and*

eyes of an Other, Ruth looks to an inanimate object to reinforce her selfhood. A table obviously cannot fulfill the role of a legitimate Other, looking at, loving, and interacting with her. In feeling herself thus affirmed by this table, Ruth is daily incorporating a more object-like sense of herself.

As Milkman leaves adolescence, instead of despising his mother, he begins to feel pity for her: "Now he saw her as a frail woman content to do tiny things; to grow and cultivate a small life that would not hurt her if it died" (64). Milkman follows Ruth one night and sees her spend an hour in the cemetery where his grandfather is buried. Discussing this scene, Eleanor Branch writes that Milkman's voyeurism is "motivated by both curiosity and suspicion, is a consequence of the contradictory pulls of attraction and repulsion he feels towards her" (75). Using the language of abjection--"attraction and repulsion"--Branch points to the abject nature of Ruth's relationship with her son. In Milkman's mind, "She was a silly, selfish, queer, faintly obscene woman" (123). She is also an insecure, lonely, and unloved woman, unable to give genuine, selfless love to her son and controlled by her own unmet desire. Scruggs describes her well by saying, "Ruth is alive only when her behavior is grotesque: sucking her father's fingers, nursing a son approaching his teens, humiliating herself in front of her husband, and moving against Hagar with the swiftness of an avenging angel" (325).

After she learns that Hagar has made six attempts to take her son's life, Ruth feels these advances as if they were threats to her own soul: "She saw her son's imminent death as the annihilation of the last occasion she had been made love to" (134). As Scruggs puts it, Ruth "clings to the adult Milkman with the same tenacity that she held

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Psychology 41 (1995): 52-84.

the child" (325). Milkman is more than just a son to Ruth; he is her emotional crutch, her reminder of physical love; he is a part of her. When Ruth was pregnant with Milkman, she "could not bite enough. Her teeth were on edge with the yearning. Like the impulse of a cat to claw, she searched for crunchy things, and when there was nothing, she would grind her teeth" (132). Since her pregnancy, Ruth has lived with the overwhelming desire that Scruggs talked about, the desire that turns into "grotesque" love. The hunger that began when Milkman was inside of her has only continued to grow during his life, and she wants her son to give her the emotional and physical support she does not receive from her husband. Instead of letting him become a separate individual, Ruth incorporates Milkman into her own identity more and more as he grows up: "Her son had never been a person to her, a separate real person. He had always been a passion" (131).[8] Ruth's lack of ego boundaries thus delays her son's recognition of himself as a bounded subject.

Milkman eventually finds his own identity through his relationship with his aunt Pilate who lives on the outskirts of town. Feared by the community due to her wine-making business and the oddity of not having a navel, Pilate herself is an unusual and abject figure. In the past, Pilate "gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships" (149). Caring more about people than restricting or controlling her own body, Pilate is able to offer a different kind of mothering to Milkman. Although early in the novel he felt like a receptacle for abject waste, "like a garbage pail for the actions and hatreds of other

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[8] Denise Heinze offers the following analysis of Ruth: "Mrs. Dead is light-complected, her African blood polluted by white rapists; she is controlled and frustrated by that society signified by the corset (body/sexuality) and her unused education (mind) but also addicted to its monetary value system. She, like the land, has been raped, harnessed, exploited and finally enslaved by the system that oppresses her" (136-37). In contrast, "Pilate, perhaps like Africa, is black, unfettered, expansive, and free" (137).

people" (120), Milkman eventually realizes his responsibility to others. As Heinze puts it, "Once Milkman disabuses himself of these artificial considerations--cleanliness and physical beauty--he is able eventually to comprehend the most valuable lesson of all--loving thy neighbor" (137). In other words, no longer fearing the physically abject, Milkman is more able to connect with others and to overcome his own psychological abjection as well.

Before this change occurs, however, Milkman's strong need for love attracts the intense passion of Pilate's granddaughter, Hagar. Growing up as the only child of an isolated household, Hagar is spoiled by a home life that revolves around her wishes. Her tragic love for Milkman is prefigured in the suffocating love given to her by Pilate and her mother, Reba. After sustaining a hidden but deep relationship with his cousin for fourteen years, Milkman suddenly breaks up with Hagar. He does this by sending her a thank-you/break-up letter which, understandably, "sent Hagar spinning into a bright blue place where the air was thin and it was silent all the time . . . [,] where everything was frozen except for an occasional burst of fire inside her chest that crackled away" (99). The subsequent description readers are given of Hagar is anything but normal: "Killing, ice-pick-wielding Hagar, who, shortly after a Christmas thank-you note, found herself each month searching the barrels and cupboards and basement shelves for some comfortably portable weapon with which to murder her true love" (126). Hagar may be living out the fantasy of every girl who has been jilted by her first "true love," but she is a thirty-six-year-old who believes that she exists because--and only because--Milkman loves her: "As regularly as the new moon searched for the tide . . . Hagar went to find the man for whom she believed she had been born into the world" (127). Her passion, turned

to murderous hate, "literally knocked her down at night, and raised her up in the morning, for when she dragged herself off to bed, having spent another day without his presence, her heart beat like a gloved fist against her ribs" (127).

Hagar's violent transformation, from girl in love to attempter of murder, is a clear sign of how unstable her own subjectivity is. In *Tales of Love*, Kristeva explains how the intense love projected onto an ideal Other can easily revert into its opposite, the murderous impulse towards annihilation produced by the death drive: "More than insane, empty, that lining of our projection and representation devices is yet another defense of the living being. When he succeeds in eroticizing it, when he allows the nonobject-oriented, prenarcissistic violence of the drive directed toward an abject to run wild, then death triumphs in that strange path" (43). Laing's description of the unbounded self's possible modes of being in relationship also fits Hagar's behavior: "Utter detachment and isolation are regarded as the only alternative to a clam- or vampire-like attachment in which the other person's life-blood is necessary for one's own survival, and yet is a threat to one's survival. Therefore, the polarity is between complete isolation or complete merging of identity rather than between separateness and relatedness" (*Divided* 56). If Milkman insists on continuing his existence separate from her, then Hagar is determined that his life must end.

After discovering Hagar crumpled up on his kitchen floor following another failed murder attempt, Milkman's friend Guitar reflects on the tragic selfishness of her addiction: "The pride, the conceit of these doormat women amazed him. They were always women who had been spoiled children. Whose whims had been taken seriously by adults and who grew up to be the stingiest, greediest people on earth and out of the

stinginess grew their stingy little love that ate everything in sight" (306). Guitar gives Hagar a sermon about abject love, criticizing her paradoxical impetus both to swallow or encompass her lover utterly and to disown her *self* completely by throwing herself away. In either motion, the unsettled, abject self refuses to be constituted by its own limits. Guitar seems to understand that for Hagar, the murderous side of this impulse is merely a displaced form of suicide. Reba and Pilate's spoiling of Hagar has greatly harmed her. As Jessica Benjamin explains, "The self-obliteration of the permissive parent . . . does not bring happiness to the child who gets everything he demands. . . . The child who feels that others are extensions of himself must constantly fear the emptiness and loss of connection that result from his fearful power" (35). Viewing Milkman as an extension of herself, Hagar believes she has lost herself when he breaks up with her and thus wants to throw her *self* either at him or entirely away.

Discussing Hagar's flawed psychology, Denise Heinze describes her as "the ultimate expression of total dependence on the validation of others" and as "[t]he child" who "becomes a monster" (30). Further, Heinze argues that "Hagar's death is the inevitability of her own objectification, the result of a highly flawed ontology. She lives by two enormously errant theorems: (1) Milkman loves me; therefore I am; (2) Milkman will love me if I possess perfect beauty" (31). This second proposition is illustrated in Hagar's crazed shopping spree. After seeing Milkman with another girl at a party, she goes home and declares: "Look at how I look. I look awful. No wonder he didn't want me. I look terrible" (308). When she announces to Reba and Pilate that she must go shopping and they ask, "What you need?" Hagar answers, "I need everything" (311). Her all-encompassing response indicates her complete dissatisfaction with who she is.

Pilate and Reba quickly pawn belongings and scrape together two hundred dollars for Hagar's endeavor--anything to make their baby happy.

Hagar returns home with a long list of commodities: "Joyce Fancy Free" and "Con Brio" shoes, "I. Miller No Color" hose, an "Evan-Picone suit, "Van Raalte" gloves, "Sunny Glow" make-up, "Youth Blend" powder, "Mango Tango" blush, "Jungle Red" lipstick, a "fawn-trimmed-in-sea-foam shortie nightgown," "Chantilly" and "Bandit" perfume, and a "Maidenform brassiere" (313-14). Since Milkman stopped loving the old her, Hagar is on a rampage to cover herself in brand names. That is, she attempts, with a new wardrobe and new hairstyle, to put on a new identity. But as Terry Eagleton points out, "Death reduces us to sheer meaningless stuff, a condition which the commodity prefigures. For all its flashy eroticism the commodity is an allegory of death" (214-15). Hagar's shopping spree is a thinly veiled effort to cover the enormous meaninglessness she now attaches to her *self.*

When she arrives home with her purchases, Hagar is soaked with rain, "loafers sluicing, hair dripping . . . limp, wet, and confused, clutching her bundles" (315). Her effort to remake herself is a pitiful failure. As Scruggs comments, "[W]e see Hagar believing that voguish clothing and cosmetics will lift her skyward, but they literally sink her to the street as these things begin to fall apart in the rain, their disintegration symbolizing the fragility of her own personality" (327). Just as Pecola becomes obsessed with her desire to have blue eyes in order to attain the standard of "white beauty," Hagar is quick to despise herself and purchase anything and everything that (white) consumer culture suggests that she must buy. While all women in an image-based culture must fight against such shallow self-definition, Heinze points towards racism's power

specifically to affect these females' notions of beauty: "Morrison suggests that black men do not see black women as objects at all but as mirrors of their own subjective selves" (25). In characters such as Milkman and Guitar, "Morrison fictionalizes those men who have not denied the physical/intrinsic beauty of their own culture, but who are helpless to stop the dehumanization of their women who have" (Heinze 25). Identifying their self-worth not in the eyes of the men who love them but rather according to the dehumanizing gaze of racist society, these women thus enter love relationships with a distorted, abject self-concept that decreases and even prevents the stability of their love.

Hagar's tragedy is mirrored in the eyes of her mother and grandmother, who loved her as she was and now are shocked by her strange, sad appearance: "And it was in their eyes that she saw what she had not seen before in the mirror: the wet ripped hose, the soiled white dress, the sticky, lumpy face powder, the streaked rouge, and the wild wet shoals of hair. All this she saw in their eyes . . ." (314). Shortly afterwards, Hagar comes down with a fever and dies. Her fate is strangely echoed later in the novel when Milkman is told why a ravine is named Ryna's Gulch, after his great-grandmother: "They say she screamed and screamed, lost her mind completely. You don't hear about women like that anymore, but there used to be more--the kind of woman who couldn't live without a particular man. And when the man left, they lost their minds, or died or something. Love, I guess" (323). Dangerously self-less love seems to run in the appropriately named Dead family.

One of Milkman's sisters, Corinthians, displays a different type of abjection. The only one in her family to go to college, Corinthians becomes overqualified for any jobs that she is actually able to get. She expects a wonderful life because she is educated and

beautiful: "High toned and high yellow, she believed what her mother was also convinced of: that she was a prize for a professional man of color" (188). Living with her parents until she is forty-two, employed only in making artificial rose petals with her sister, Lena, Corinthians remains in a noticeably child-like existence, working with symbols of love whose artificiality emphasizes her distance from actual adult love. It is not surprising, then, that she suddenly "suffered a severe depression which lasted until she made up her mind to get out of the house" (189). Finding herself a new job and living on her own propels Corinthians toward a stronger subjectivity.

On her bus trips to and from work, Corinthians meets a man named Mr. Porter who watches her carefully. When he hands her an envelope one day with a poem written inside, Corinthians tosses it in the garbage. She can tell just by looking at Porter that he is not the proud professional man for whom she has been waiting. After the envelope is thrown away, "It stayed there [in the garbage] all day, but it also stayed on her mind. . . . She couldn't explain to herself why. The man was a complete nuisance and his flirtation an insult" (193). Still, Corinthians begins dating him. Though "she hated him a lot for the shame she felt, . . . those swift feelings of contempt never lasted long enough for her to refuse those drive-in movie sessions where she was the sole object of someone's hunger and satisfaction" (194). Part of Corinthians' shame here seems to come not only from the fact that Porter is of a lower class but from her own human need to make herself dependent upon the loving recognition of an Other. As Sartre explains, there is a shame fundamental to the human condition of being in relationship:

> Pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object but in general of being *an* object; that is, of ***recognizing myself*** in this degraded, fixed,

> and dependent being which I am for the Other. Shame is the feeling of an *original fall*, not because of the fact that I may have committed this or that particular fault but simply that I have "fallen" into the world in the midst of things and that I need the mediation of the Other in order to be what I am. (264-65)

However, when Corinthians refuses to introduce Porter to her parents, or even to tell them about him, he becomes angry. He kicks her out of his car one night; she walks away, then goes running back in fear that she is going to lose the only love she has ever known. When Porter won't open his car window or door, "Corinthians climbed up on the fender and lay full out across the hood of the car. She didn't look through the windshield at him. She just lay there, stretched across the car, her fingers struggling for a grip on steel" (199). By prostrating herself in order to hold on to her relationship, Corinthians enacts a degree of abject love that ultimately wins back her boyfriend. He takes her to his poor apartment that night, makes love to her, and Corinthians leaves with a new feeling: "In place of vanity she now felt a self-esteem that was quite new" (201). In subjecting herself to another, without the ulterior motives that tainted the love of James' heroines, Corinthians finds her own subjectivity strengthened.

Jane Bakerman's reading of Corinthians groups her with Hagar, as a woman who trades her self for love: "When Corinthians makes her choice, she does so by subjugating and humiliating herself completely" (561). She further explains the parallels between the two: "[T]o both Hagar and Corinthians, life *has* no worth without the men they love; they have no identity save the reflection of themselves in the eyes of those men. Hagar has never learned to value herself; Corinthians' pride is arid and useless in the society in

which she finds herself" (563). Each woman, Bakerman believes, "defines herself only according to the standards and desires of a beloved man. . . . Hagar dies because she cannot be the kind of woman Milkman desires; and Corinthians abandons the self-image she has cherished for a lifetime to find menial work in a white-controlled world and to find sexual release with a man who demands that she submit completely" (563). While the facts of this analysis are correct, I believe Bakerman is missing important distinctions between the two characters.

Like Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye*, Corinthians has been trained to think of herself as better than many members of her race. She is taught to avoid contact with positions and people who are "beneath her"--in effect, to shun the abject. It is telling that Corinthians has to reach through a day's worth of garbage to retrieve Porter's letter: "When evening came, she reached down through the grapefruit rind, the tea leaves, and the salami casing to find it, brush it clean, and transfer it to her purse" (193). Avoiding all those who are "beneath" her has left Corinthians alone and still living at home in her forties. It is only by encountering and accepting a "lower" man's humanness that Corinthians is able to find a real relationship and leave the household in which her sister is still trapped. While racism perhaps has prevented Corinthians from finding a job or relationship that might have been more suited to her personality, even partial fulfillment and a shared life with Porter seem preferable, and very different, from the suicidal love expressed by Hagar.

Although Ruth remains abjectly submissive in an unhealthy marriage and Hagar abjects herself, both psychologically and literally, through a boundless love of Milkman, Corinthians provides a contrasting picture. She is perhaps the one woman in *Song of*

Solomon who is strong enough to make peace with her own human need for love, as well as with her own connection to the socially abject lower rung of the black community.

In *Beloved*, Morrison presents her most elaborate picture of abjection. The character of Beloved may be read as a personification of the psychological *abject* itself. Typically she is viewed as Sethe's murdered child returning as a ghost; she has also been interpreted as the ghost of Sethe's mother or as the voice of one or more Africans lost in the Middle Passage and during slavery.[9] Beloved's ghost-like qualities also point toward a psychological reading. For Paul D, Denver, and Sethe, Beloved provides a soothing sense of psychological merger while at the same time representing a temptation, or threat, to the limits and separation of their own selfhood. Her character functions analogously to the *abject* itself.

Slavery prevents the development of subjectivity. In its treatment of people as objects merely *subject to* ownership by others, the system does a great deal to inhibit slaves' recognition of themselves as *selves*. In Morrison's novel, this tattered sense of self is perhaps the most significant scar left to former slaves after years spent in slavery. As Betty Jane Powell explains, slavery "denies autonomy and renders the self

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[9] Both Jennifer Holden-Kirwan's and Claudine Raynaud's articles explore the interpretation that Beloved is the ghost of a slave lost in the Middle Passage. Raynaud's analysis, titled "The Poetics of Abjection in *Beloved*," is particularly relevant to my approach:

> The Middle Passage must be told at the cost of confronting repressed memory, the "origin" (the cloaca, rape, and child-murder) and this shape of hope, the chosen child from the beloved black man. Expulsion is framed by the appeal to retain, to salvage, to keep, and to pass on. Memory's ambivalent working of casting off and (s)electing is spelled out at this moment in the novel, for memory is repeatedly defined as an act of resistance. Figuratively, then, memory is a mother who kills and saves her children. (75)

This interpretation also recalls one of Morrison's comments about the novel: "[T]his has got to be the least read of all the books I'd written because it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean, it's national amnesia" (Heinze 180). Fitting Kristeva's description of the abject, the events

unrecognizable" (105). In *Beloved*, "Morrison writes about the need for victimized people to form an integrated self in the face of a fragmented and unacceptable existence" (Powell 105). Kristin Boudreau links the effects of slavery to those detailed in studies of torture. She argues that for the novel's characters, "[t]heir language, their reasoning powers, even their sense of self have been dismantled by the process of torture" (453). Furthermore, Boudreau says, "*Beloved* persistently asks its readers where selfhood is located and seems to imply that language and memory, already dissolved by pain, bear responsibility for constructions of self" (457). Similarly, Barbara Schapiro writes,

> The novel reveals how the condition of enslavement in the external world, particularly the denial of one's status as a human subject, has deep repercussions in the individual's internal world. These internal resonances are so profound that even if one is eventually freed from external bondage, the self will still be trapped in an inner world that prevents a genuine experience of freedom. (194)

Physical liberty, in other words, cannot instantly repair years of missed psychological liberty. The characters of *Beloved* suffer from deep, unseen damage that extends beyond lost loved ones and physical scars like the one on Sethe's back.

This scarring is noticeable in the first descriptions of relationships between these characters. Sethe's eyes are portrayed as so full of pain that they are "two wells into which [Paul D] had trouble gazing" (9). Paul D, in turn, has closed off dimensions of himself so that he retains only minimal functioning; he "had shut down a generous

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recounted in *Beloved* carry their own "powers of horror." Similarly, Morrison says of *The Bluest Eye*: "[T]his is a terrible story about things one would rather not know anything about" ("Unspeakable" 386).

portion of his head, operating on the part that helped him walk, eat, sleep, sing" (41). Talking to Sethe, he recalls feeling stripped of all human agency on a farm when he had a bit put into his mouth and saw a group of roosters looking at him (71). He then describes a staring contest with one rooster in particular, "Mister," who to him possessed a greater sense of freedom and individuality than he ever would, even after being freed from slavery (72). Later narration, from Sethe's perspective, emphasizes how years spent in slavery have taken a psychological toll: "[E]very mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost" (58). Just as Paul D feels that a bird seemed superior to him in stature, Sethe realizes that "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (95). After being treated for so much of their life as owned objects, former slaves are left with a deformed self-image constituting, at best, an embryonic stage of subjectivity.

Like Ruth in *Song of Solomon*, Sethe's weak subjectivity thus impairs her maternal skill. As Paul D tells her, "Your love is too thick" (164). Although he says this after hearing about how she tried to murder her own children at Sweet Home, the pronouncement stands as a potential criticism of Sethe's love towards Denver, Beloved, and Paul D himself. Her ability to be a mother to her remaining children is badly damaged not only by her suffering the experience of slavery but also from being the child of a slave herself. As Jennifer Holden-Kirwan points out, "Deprived of a mother . . . Sethe can never be a daughter and thus never achieve subjectivity through daughterhood; furthermore, the absence of the maternal look as a child continues to deprive Sethe of subjectivity as an adult" (423). Comparing the limitations of motherhood in both *Sula* and *Beloved*, Laurie Vickroy says that for both Eva and Sethe, "Neither mother can

maintain an equilibrium between herself and her children. They cannot acknowledge their children as separate subjects because they cannot be freely acting subjects themselves" (300). The inability to recognize the distinction between self and loved Other thus initiates an internal abjection that is replicated in the next generation. Furthermore, Vickroy writes, "In *Beloved* and *Sula*, mothers' histories especially consist in struggles with patterns of dominance. They need to act, to be acknowledged as actors in their own lives and on their children's behalf, but controlled by circumstances, their actions can only take on destructive forms" (302). Sethe's wounds have been passed on to her daughter, Denver, who is described as having an "imagination [that] produced its own hunger and its own food, which she badly needed because loneliness wore her out" (18-19). In her monologue chapter, Denver even describes fearing Sethe: "Don't love her too much. Don't. Maybe it's still in her the thing that makes it all right to kill her children. . . . She cut my head off every night. . . . Her pretty eyes looking at me like I was a stranger" (206). Knowing that her mother killed one of her children before, she fears that Sethe may do so again; seeing her mother look at her blankly, Denver feels robbed of her identity as Sethe's daughter.

In contrast, the initial descriptions of Beloved concentrate on the intensity of her gaze at Sethe and the fantasy of oral incorporation that reflects an arrested development: "Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes. . . . Sethe was flattered by Beloved's open, quiet devotion. The same adoration from her daughter (had it been forthcoming) would have annoyed her; made her chill at the thought of having raised a ridiculously dependent child" (57). The fact that Sethe would have found such a gaze from Denver strange points to the highly unusual, even surreal, relationship Beloved immediately

establishes with her. Sethe also recognizes an intense, raw desire in Beloved's look towards her: "The longing she saw there [in Beloved's eyes] was bottomless. Some plea barely in control" (58). Beloved here seems to take the form of Desire itself, of the initial, all-encompassing desire of an infant to ingest and to be inseparably one with her mother.

Despite Paul D's initial dislike of Beloved, she ends up having a hypnotic physical affect on him and he sleeps with her several times, surprisingly, just after his relationship with Sethe has begun. Late in the novel Paul D explains to Sethe that these encounters with Beloved were not ordinary or even enjoyable:

> Coupling with her wasn't even fun. It was more like a brainless urge to stay alive. Each time she came, pulled up her skirts, a life hunger overwhelmed him and he had no more control over it than over his lungs. And afterward, beached and gobbling air, in the midst of repulsion and personal shame he was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to. (264)

Beloved seems to have the power to transport Paul D to a place of reunion or merger, that "ocean-deep place" that is his own state of pre-subjectivity.

Denver soon develops her own intensely close friendship with Beloved. One way of interpreting their bond is that Beloved is Denver's murdered sister and that the two are finally able to share the sisterly affection they were meant to have. Descriptions of the pleasure Denver finds in Beloved's presence, however, seem to give more significance to the power Beloved carries. Initially the two are portrayed as enjoying a comfortable reciprocity: "They spent up or held on to their feelings in harmonious ways. What one

had to give the other was pleased to take" (99). But soon Denver appears to become blissfully enchanted by Beloved's gaze, just as Sethe is. For Denver,

> to be looked at in turn was beyond appetite. . . . It was lovely. Not to be stared at, not seen, but being pulled into view by the interested, uncritical eyes of the other. Having her hair examined as a part of her self, not as material or a style. Having her lips, nose, chin caressed as they might be if she were a moss rose a gardener paused to admire. Denver's skin dissolved under that gaze and became soft and bright like the lisle dress that had its arm around her mother's waist. She floated near but outside her own body, feeling vague and intense at the same time. Needing nothing. Being what there was. (118)

This focus on Denver's physical attributes, her "lips, nose, chin," creates a sensual, nearly sexual, connotation for the enjoyment between Denver and Beloved. The picture of her "skin dissolv[ing] under that gaze" similarly suggests the intensity of far more than sisterly love and also the boundary-challenging function of the abject. In one scene in which Denver is unable to find Beloved, she panics: "She feels like an ice cake torn away from the solid surface of the stream, floating on darkness, thick and crashing against the edges of things around it. Breakable, meltable, and cold. . . . Now she is crying because she has no self" (123). Denver's fear is analogous to that experienced by infants who, having passed through the mirror phase, still rely on their mother as the primary mirroring affirmation of their identity and panic when they are away from their her. Beloved's presence consolidates Denver's identity; her absence destroys its foundation.

Further descriptions of Beloved herself, in suggesting that she is not solid flesh

but strangely ghost-like, also point to the idea she is not a separate, bounded self of her own. Mary Jane Elliott describes Beloved as having an "unbalanced" self: "Beloved knows only desire; she knows only what she lacks. But she cannot be satisfied; her unbalanced self, consisting only of desire, is inexhaustibly hungry" (192). Her manifestation of the psychological abject is represented physically, as Beloved seems like a loosely constructed puppet on the verge of falling apart: "It is difficult keeping her head on her neck, her legs attached to her hips when she is by herself. Among the things she could not remember was when she first knew that she could wake up any day and find herself in pieces. She had two dreams: exploding, and being swallowed" (133). A key phrase here is "when she is by herself." Beloved does not feel as precarious in the presence of others, who by their gaze can affirm her existence. Significant also is the juxtaposition of "exploding" with "being swallowed"; either would obviously result in her disappearance, but the fact that both explosion and ingestion are feared indicates the complete instability of the borders separating her from other people.[10]

Both Denver and Sethe express ownership of Beloved. At the end of Denver's monologue she says, "It was a greedy ghost and needed a lot of love, which was only natural, considering. And I do. Love her. I do. She played with me and always came to be with me whenever I needed her. She's mine, Beloved. She's mine" (209). And Sethe claims Beloved too: "But my love was tough and she back now. . . . [W]hen I tell you

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[10] Betty Jane Powell discusses the way that "Beloved is continually in fear of exploding, falling to pieces, or being chewed up" and argues that the scene in which Beloved loses a tooth is Morrison's "comment on the fragility of the self, and the characters' tenuous grasp on identity" (109). Furthermore, Powell connects the portrayal of Beloved to the novel's view of selfhood: "For Morrison the ability to see oneself as physically whole and to appreciate the beauty of one's body is an integral part of knowing oneself. . . . Morrison underlines the terrible fact that at any moment bodies (and stories, and therefore lives) can splinter into parts" (106-07).

you mine, I also mean I'm yours. I wouldn't draw breath without my children" (203). In Beloved's own monologue that follows, she primarily claims herself as part of Sethe, again echoing an infant's point of view of complete connection prior to the mirror phase:

> I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too. (210)

> she chews and swallows me I am gone now I am her face my own face has left me. . . . Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile her smiling face is the place for me it is the face I lost she is my face smiling at me. (213)

The linguistic fluidity of this chapter--the breakdown of sentence structure and punctuation, and even the literal gaps of extra space within the text--emphasizes the fluidity of Beloved's psychological boundaries and her overwhelming need to consume or merge with the Other. Barbara Schapiro offers a similar analysis: "The monologues reveal an utter breakdown of the borders between self and other, a collapse that is bound up with incorporative fantasies. . . . Beloved's monologue is marked by a total absence of punctuation, highlighting the fantasy of merging and oneness at the essence of her plaintive ramblings" (202). Just as the abject is textually figured in Olsen's "Requa," it is here rendered as a break from the rules of linguistic signification, threatening to undo the boundaries of the novel.

In her article "The Poetics of Abjection in *Beloved*," Claudine Raynaud reads Beloved's stream-of-consciousness chapter as a reenactment of the repressed memory of

slaves lost in the Middle Passage:

> The reconstructed "voice" of the monologue, which the reader identifies as that of the slave daughter, wrestles with meaning as it confronts abjection both outside (the "objective" experience of the Middle Passage) and inside (the "subjective" exploration of the pre-Oedipal). . . . Beloved, thrown beside her self, ab-jected, cast off, consciousness struggling with the senseless, encounters the unassimilable (like the body unable to keep down food) . . . in four pages of a broken poetic borderline text, Beloved's "unuttered thoughts." (71)

Pointing to images of vomiting, disease, and rape which appear in Beloved's monologue, Raynaud links the sickening merger of bodies in a slave ship's cargo hold to the fusion that takes place between Beloved and Sethe: "In this stark poetic rendering, Morrison mimicks the gradual verbalization of meaning . . . . At the same time, the return to beginnings leads to a revisiting of the origin--that is, total fusion with and possession of the mother, a passage through the site where subject and object are undifferentiated in mutual narcissistic possession, a return to abjection" (82-83). While this analysis offers a useful description of the dynamics between Sethe and Beloved, it merges two types of abjection--an infant's positive thrust towards individuation and the horrifying abject physical conditions among transported slaves' bodies--in a troubling way. This juxtaposition, however, may represent both sides of the violent splitting that characterizes the self-consciousness of a person subject to being a despised *Other*.

In succumbing to this return to intense mother/infant love with Beloved, however, Sethe ends up nearly losing herself in her extreme efforts to satisfy the unsatisfiable

ghost-child. Denver also becomes further neglected as "Sethe played all the harder with Beloved, who never got enough of anything: lullabies, new stitches, the bottom of the cake bowl, the top of the milk. . . . Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire" (240). As Beloved consumes more of Sethe's time and energy, she strangely also begins to take on her characteristics, consuming her identity as well: "Dressed in Sethe's dresses, she stroked her skin with the palm of her hand. She imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh and used her body the same way down to the walk. . . [;] it was difficult for Denver to tell who was who" (241). Sethe even tells Beloved that she "was more important, meant more to her than her own life" (242). During this cycle of merging, Beloved becomes more like an adult and Sethe becomes progressively more child-like: "She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it" (250). Worried that her mother has quit working and is out of contact with the community, Denver realizes "that her mother sat around like a rag doll, broke down, finally, from trying to take care of and make up for" (243). Beloved thus traps Sethe into the Sisyphean task of paying back enough love to end her desire.

The novel ends, however, with Beloved's ghost-like disappearance and with Denver, Paul D, and Sethe feeling stronger as individuals. When Denver faces her fear of leaving the house and asks for help from Lady Jones, she breaks away from her own attraction to Beloved and experiences a psychological rebirth. When she passes Nelson Lord on the road and he says, "Take care of yourself, Denver," for her, "[i]t was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve . . . [;] but she heard it as though it were what language was made for" (252). (Fittingly, in Lacanian psychology, language

is precisely what the self is made for and emerges from.) After the community's intervention has forced Beloved to wander back into the creek,[11] Paul D is willing to return and renew his relationship with Sethe. Remembering how his friend Sixo described the woman he loved, Paul D applies the description to Sethe: "She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order" (272-73). Being with Sethe again returns him to this feeling of coherence. Despite Sethe's mourning over losing Beloved a second time, Paul D's reassurance also seems to offer her a note of hope at the end: "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (273). And she answers, "Me? Me?" (273). Still questioning her own subjectivity, Sethe's repetition of "me" seems to imply that the concept will stick. With the reinforcement of Paul D's love, she will finally emerge from abjection and establish a relationship with herself.

In looking at these changes experienced by Denver and Sethe during the novel, Maki Tonegawa argues that Morrison is "underscoring the necessity of reenacting repressed pre-oedipal symbiosis as the first step to envisioning an autonomous self. Only through the hard experience of acting out the repressed is one able to be free from its obsessional power and recover proper and healthy attitudes toward it" (98). Her interpretation would indeed put Beloved in the role of the abject, since Beloved is the difference, the "repressed," that is "acted out" in the course of the story. Likewise, Kristin Boudreau views Beloved as a representation of a psychological process. She draws an analogy between Beloved and the metaphoric, shifting structure of all selves as they stand in relation to others: "Beloved's disappearance only literalizes what happens to

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[11] Maki Tonegawa observes that "not only in *Sula* but also in *Beloved* does the water, symbolic of amniotic fluid, appear at the critical moments when boundaries of the self become flexible, precarious, and almost

all selves: constructed in terms of audience, she can exist only as long as her audience chooses to acknowledge her. . . . Beloved, I would argue, is a model for all selves: if she is ghostly and ephemeral, she only literalizes what occurs to all other characters in Morrison's novel" (463). Further, she writes, "To be human, *Beloved* suggests, is no different from being ghostly: to be human means to be as likely spectral as substantial, fictional as real, and to be ontologically as well as emotionally contingent on one's audience, to occupy an ever shifting identity" (464). The concept of being "emotionally contingent on one's audience" returns us again to consideration of the power that a dominant white society has, if it is the primary audience, in defining the subjectivity of black selves.

In her discussion of *Beloved*, Barbara Schapiro makes several important points which apply to other Morrison novels I have discussed. Using a foundation of object-relations psychology, she writes, "For Morrison's characters, African-Americans in a racist, slave society, there is no reliable other to recognize and affirm their existence. The mother, the child's first vital other, is made unreliable or unavailable by a slave system which either separates her from her child or so enervates and depletes her that she has no self with which to confer recognition" (194). Her argument continues: "How can a child see self or mother as subjects when the society denies them that status? . . . The major characters in the novel are all working out of a deep loss to the self, a profound narcissistic wound that results from a breakdown and distortion of the earliest relations between self and other" (197). If a racist or slave society produces unstable selves, and an unstable self's potential to do damage is great, then it is no surprise that Morrison's

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dissolved" (95).

fiction is filled with abject characters who, in turn, create abject relationships with others: "If the infant is traumatically frustrated in its first love relationship, if it fails to receive the affirmation and recognition it craves, the intense neediness of the infant's own love becomes dangerous and threatening" (Schapiro 197). Just as with the characters in *Beloved*, "The hunger for recognition, as discussed, may be so overwhelming that it threatens to swallow up the other and the self, destroying all boundaries in one total annihilation" (201). This pattern Schapiro describes applies to Cholly and Polly Breedlove, Ruth Dead, Hagar, and Eva and Sula Peace as well. Love between one or more psychologically abject, unstable selves cannot work: "This form of possessing and objectifying the other, however, cannot satisfy--it imprisons the self within its own devouring omnipotence, its own narcissism. True satisfaction or joy . . . can only be achieved through 'mutual recognition' between self and other, between two subjects or selves" (Schapiro 203). One subject's narcissistic fantasy, even when motivated by a need to compensate for an unhealthy lack of recognition or negative recognition, must be limited by the Other's insistence on the mutual integrity of selves.

Morrison's fiction is filled, then, with what Terry Otten calls "horrific love." As Otten explains, "There is an underlying strain of cruelty and violence that can erupt in [Morrison's] most sympathetic and victimized characters and compel them to inflict frightful destruction on seemingly innocent people. They seem capable at once of enormous criminality and unmitigated love" (651). This lawlessness of the characters is produced, Otten believes, by a culture that denies personhood to the victims of racism, thus distorting these victims' perception of how to express love: "It is the creation of forces so brutal that they can transform conventional 'signifiers' of cruelty and evil into

gestures of extraordinary love--incestuous rape, infanticide, and murder articulate not the immorality condemned by the dominant culture, but the inverse. They become acts 'signifyin(g)' a profound if often convoluted love" (652). Otten also emphasizes the power of mothers in adding to this problem: "Freedom in Morrison's novels is always perilous, and a mother's freedom to love her child is exceedingly dangerous--it is potentially self-consumptive" (658).

Similarly, Denise Heinze, in her discussion of *The Bluest Eye*, makes a telling point about parenthood that also applies to many of Morrison's novels: "Parents abusing children becomes Morrison's most effective means of revealing the rage of the oppressed. . . . Inevitably, the home becomes the battleground in which the oppressed, denied any sort of expression in the external world, turn their rage against each other or on themselves, much like entrapped animals who will chew off a part of their bodies in order to escape" (94). Lucille Fultz's analysis of Morrison's work is also particularly relevant:

> Aware of the tremendous burdens and limiting possibilities for African Americans engendered by white society, Morrison reminds us that African Americans themselves must assume some responsibility for their own self-hatred. She neither excuses nor averts our gaze from the "seamy" underside of black America. Nothing is too horrible for depiction or too painful for words. . . . The details are vividly portrayed, not for sensationalism but to enable our understanding of the forces that cause certain individuals to engage in such heinous behavior while others, like Sula, can unwincingly gaze upon such tragedies. More important,

> Morrison demands that we see the whole picture--including the unspeakable. (13)

In Morrison's work, "the unspeakable" often takes shape through permutations of abjection.

Toni Morrison had said that "all her fiction, ultimately, is about love" (Otten 652). *Love* is even the title of her latest novel. Morrison adds, however, that "With the best intentions in the world we can do enormous harm, enormous harm . . . [,] lovers and mothers and fathers and sisters" (Otten 652). The narrator of *The Bluest Eye* makes a similar declaration at the end of that novel: "Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye" (159). Her novels often portray this potential harm through the obsessions, abuses, and failures of abject love.

Morrison does demonstrate, as well, that there are different types of abjection, that there is the bodily, messy, dirty level of the abject as well as the social or psychological sense of being cast-off or thrown-away. Geraldine's obsessive avoidance of surface abjection is her failing. Pilate and Corinthians experience growth when they recognize that the physically abject should not be a barrier to psychological growth. In personifying abjection, Beloved does threaten to swallow up Sethe and Denver, but she ultimately strengthens them when they learn to separate from her. Morrison also shows that negotiating the deeper level of abjection is part of being human, regardless of color. While race is the predominant cause of abjection in *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, in *Sula*

and *Song of Solomon*, the bonds of families, friends, and lovers are threatened by the abject in ways that seem independent from the characters' racial identity.

Even in those novels in which racial abjection is not a primary factor, the presence of race and its effect on the characters looms in the background. Near the opening of *Sula*, Shadrack is introduced. Wounded in World War I and returned to civilian life with no memory of who he is or where he belongs, he ends up in a jail cell where he remembers "his earlier desire to see his own face. . . . There in the toilet water he saw a grave black face. A black so definite, so unequivocal, it astonished him. He had been harboring a skittish apprehension that he was not real--that he didn't exist at all" (13). Experiencing a validation of his identity from a mirroring in toilet water, Shadrack ironically is given a message of who he is from the society that has abused him in war and unfairly imprisoned him. In *Song of Solomon*, racial wounds are revealed through the character of Guitar and his involvement in the radical group the Seven Days. As Guitar tells Milkman, "Listen, baby, people do funny things. Specially us. The cards are stacked against us and just trying to stay in the game, stay alive and in the game, makes us do funny things. Things we can't help. Things that make us hurt one another" (87). Perhaps trying to excuse his own violent behavior, Guitar's statement here also serves as pointed commentary on the dysfunctional love that Milkman is trying to accept within his own family.

Mirroring back their self-image to others, selves unfairly subjected by society reflect that damage in their gaze. Most of Morrison's characters look at each other with the same pain and confusion with which their mother looked at herself and looked at them. Perhaps Morrison is suggesting that as minorities within racist society, African-

Americans have yet to emerge from the mirror stage as a race; they have yet to experience the security of being able to trust and feel unconditional love from their "mother" country. Racist society experiences them as Other, not out of love but out of loathing, and those labeled as "Other" find it hard not to identify with that negative recognition. In their unusual, shocking, and destructive expressions of love, these characters love their neighbors, friends, and family members as they love themselves.

". . . it is the Word that discloses the abject. But at the same time, the Word alone purifies from the abject." Julia Kristeva

CONCLUSION

Just as the word *subject* simultaneously carries the ideas of agency and of being subject to something or someone, the word *abjection*, by nature, is paradoxical. Good and bad, tempting and frightening, necessary but dangerous--it is a rite of passage for children but can become an illness as well. It is a reminder of human mortality that can also become an impetus toward suicide. It is a required boundary between selves and the prerequisite to all love. It is Freud's *unheimlich* and Lacan's *méconnaissance*: an uncanny recognition that disturbs by pointing out the difference between what one is and what one perceives one's self to be.

What is abject makes humans uncomfortable because of the way the abject points to the boundaries--physical, psychological, and social--that define our being and our relationships. Abjection threatens to undo us but also knits our selfhood together. Like a magnetic force made visible, the abject reminds people of their bodies, their difference from others, and their death. Repellent, it unsettles by negative distinction. The abject is the differential of human calculus, the change in people during time and space.

Presentations of abjection in twentieth-century literature demonstrate changing concerns in the fields of psychology and sociology and provide a powerful way of analyzing paradigms of human selfhood in literature. Allowing selected characters to question the very constitution of selfhood, these authors demonstrate the relationship between subjectivity in theory and the literary character subject to linguistic operations within a text. Most importantly, the instances of abjection I have discussed show the

strengthening or debilitating effect that identification processes can have within an individual, a family, or a community.

Henry James' innovations in point of view reflect the beginnings of ego psychology. His characters have relationships with them*selves*. When readers know they are not seeing the action through the eyes of a particular character, that character's behavior becomes intriguing or perhaps nearly unexplainable. For Charlotte Stant and Kate Croy, their disowning of themselves physically and emotionally becomes fascinating because readers realize these women indeed *have* a complex self that is hidden from the narrative perspective as well as from the upper-class society encouraging them to behave as actresses on stage. While their relationships with those in their social circle are made visible through the plot, their abject relationship with their selves is the impetus to each novel's action as well as its great mystery. In James, following Freud's theory of the unconscious, selfhood becomes like an iceberg--mostly underwater, largely invisible but massive.

Reflecting the social concerns of Depression-era literature, Tillie Olsen uses literary portraits of abjection to show the importance of community and familial environment in developing an individual's sense of self. The self is dependent both on material resources and on emotional investment. Community and family have great power in Olsen's work, either to endow selves with health and confidence or to deprive them of basic resources, care, and love. Her recognition of the strong link between social and psychological determinants in selfhood formation prefigures the field of social psychology and philosophies such as social constructivism.

The self in Vladimir Nabokov's work is morbidly humorous, deranged,

thoroughly self-involved, and self-conscious. His surrealist and early postmodern literary style often features characters who have unusual relationships with themselves. One character, for instance, comes to see himself as a chess piece in the game of life. Another is certain he is not himself, telling his story in third person, while yet another is sure another self *is* him (whom he intends to kill in a quasi-suicide that would actually be a murder). Charles Kinbote, in his immense insecurity, imagines himself as king of an imaginary country and sees reflections of himself everywhere. Illustrating a glossary of psychological disorders, these characters profoundly point to the opacity and flimsiness of *self*. Their various forms of abjection present the self in turmoil, comedic and tragic, grossly unrealistic but familiar, too. Nabokov uses abjection to make us laugh, but also to make us think about who we are . . . or who we think we are.

Don DeLillo presents the self enmeshed in Western culture, in its technology, its violence, and its sanitary distance from death. His novels show the distinction between characters who have accepted the pre-fabricated self of a postmodern environment versus those who remain self-conscious, reflective existentialists. Contrary to poststructuralist theory, for DeLillo the modernist self is not dead. Yet, its validity and agency is continually thwarted by a society refusing to recognize it or feeding upon it. Sensitivity to the abject is a positive sign in DeLillo's work, showing that a self retains enough distance from the abject to identify it. However, characters like Selvy and Oswald cannot recognize the abject because, forfeiting nearly all subjectivity, they have become it.

Just as Olsen uses abjection to make visible social injustice, Toni Morrison uses it to highlight the effects of racism. Her novels feature characters who have learned to despise themselves because they are despised by society. Portraying the effects of

slavery in *Beloved*, she explores the beginnings of this process when human selves were literally commodified and made into objects. Unable to know or love themselves well, they remain unable to love other people in healthy ways. A community experiencing large-scale ostracism, or abjection, within a culture thus replicates countless smaller scenes of exclusion, victimization, and loathing in place of loving. The self is dependent on family love and respect in Morrison's work, but the family and individual's health is just as dependent on larger community structures and social prejudices.

The abject is not hard to find in literature. What is worth considering, however, is how various texts present abjection, what these presentations reveal about selfhood and, most importantly, what is at stake in the way selfhood is presented. In revealing many ways that the self comes to be experienced through initial and later moments of positive identification, these instances of abjection point to an essential structure of the human being, an openness to an Other, a need for recognition, and a desire for interaction beyond itself.

In his book *I and Thou*, Martin Buber distinguishes between I-You (Thou) relationships and I-It transactions. He explains that there are only two types of relationships: "that in which I recognize It as an object, especially of experience and use, and that in which I respond with my whole being to You" (16). Furthermore, I comes into being and knows itself only through standing in relation to another: "There is no I as such but only the I of the basic word I-You and the I of the basic word I-It" (54). Buber's description of the dynamics surrounding the "It" mode of being are analogous to a self stuck in abjection, a self unable to recognize the Other because it is unable to experience itself as "I".

Similarly, in *The Bonds of Love*, Jessica Benjamin discusses the tension inherent in any self-other relationship: "To experience recognition in the fullest, most joyful way, entails the paradox that 'you' who are 'mine' are also different, new, outside of me. . . . The joy I take in your existence must include *both* my connection to you *and* your independent existence" (15). Experiencing the other as "different" and "outside" of self is an acknowledgment of the fundamental abjection, of the chasm between boundaries, of all individuals. As Benjamin further explains, "The need for recognition entails this fundamental paradox: at the very moment of realizing our own independence, we are dependent upon another to recognize it. At the very moment we come to understand the meaning of 'I, myself,' we are forced to see the limitations of that self" (33). Abjection enables relationship but also sets the limit of relationship. Like a continually reversing magnetic field, abjection draws people together in recognition but also repels them when this attraction turns to misrecognition: I thought you saw me and knew me, but apparently you do not. I thought I saw you and knew you, but apparently I do not.

What drives this dynamic is the desire *to be known*. To recognize myself in the eyes of an Other in part means to re-*recognize*, to know myself again. Literally to recognize myself, according to the linguistic root of the word, I must first "cognize," or know, myself. Yet, if the self is known only through relationship, then initially the self only comes into being when it abjects or throws forward the net of self-consciousness and sees itself from the outside by way of a literal mirror but also in the mirror of another's look. Sartre's explanation in *Being and Nothingness* helps to clarify this:

> [I]f the act of being-looked-at, in its pure form, is not bound to the *Other's body* any more than in the pure realization of the *cogito* my consciousness

> of being a consciousness is not bound to *my own* body, then we must consider the appearance of certain objects in the field of my experience--in particular the convergence of the Other's eyes in my direction--as a pure *monition*, as the pure occasion of realizing my *being-looked-at*. (252-53)

Again, for Sartre the initiation of selfhood depends on a paradox: "Thus this Me which has been alienated and refused is simultaneously my bond with the Other and the symbol of our absolute separation. In fact to the extent that I am The One who makes there be an Other by means of the affirmation of my selfness, the Me-as-object is mine and I claim it" (261). The "I" who learns to claim itself as "Me," however, as a subject experienced by others as object, is reminded of its body in the experience of being-looked-at. Psychological selfness is thus anchored to corporeal being, and this realization carries with it the power of the abject:

> A dull and inescapable nausea perpetually reveals my body to my consciousness. Sometimes we look for the pleasant or for physical pain to free ourselves from this nausea; but as soon as the pain and the pleasure are existed by consciousness, they in turn manifest its facticity and its contingency; and it is on the ground of this nausea that they are revealed . . . [;] it is on the foundation of this nausea that all concrete and empirical nauseas . . . are produced and make us vomit. (314-15)

Linked with the capacity to know ourselves, then, is the fundamental tendency to loathe ourselves, to loathe the flesh that changes with time and the difference between our felt selves as experienced within and our bodily selves as perceived from without.

In her book *Tales of Love*, written after *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva discusses the

ongoing role abjection plays in any love relationship. Love entails "a state of instability in which the individual is no longer indivisible and allows himself to become lost in the other, for the other. Within love, a risk that might otherwise be tragic is accepted, normalized, made fully reassuring" (4). Becoming "lost in the other" and existing "for the other" signifies a self's waiving of its rights to subjectivity, a self willing to become abject in order to draw closer to the other. Love is, for Kristeva, that which "reigns between the two borders of *narcissism* and *idealization*. Its Highness the Ego projects and glorifies itself, or else shatters into pieces and is engulfed, when it admires itself in the mirror of an idealized Other" (6). Both of these "borders" ultimately repel lovers from each other. Lovers join in sharing a mutual idealization of each other that cannot be indefinitely sustained: "loving implies a certain wrenching of the self for the sake of ideal identification with the loved one" (*Tales* 168). In addition, "[a]s soon as an *other* appears different from myself, it becomes alien, repelled, repugnant, abject--hated" (222). As Kristeva explains, "Narcissus kills himself because he realizes that he loves a fake" (126), and "There is no idealizing identification without the murder of the loved object" (143). Eventually disturbing a self by forcing it to realize its misrecognition of itself or of the Other, the abject's unsettling power returns lovers to their states of separate, sovereign subjectivity.

Abjection is thus one important way of studying the dynamics of love. Catherine Clément acknowledges this in her book *Syncope: The Philosophy of Rapture*. Like the musical technique of syncopation, producing expectation (and desire) through delay, syncopation in human relationships is the abjection that enables connection, a repeating cycle of distance and union followed by distance. She describes the process as the

rhythm of Hegel's dialectic: "It is a departure and a hiccup; a logic, and a nausea. . . . I push you away, but I love you" (73). Echoing object-relations theorists, Clément believes that "there are two movements, the first by which the One sets itself apart and expels; the second, the attraction, by which the One reassembles its scattered multiples" (74). Again using images of abjection, she explains, "The dialectical creature is driven by a deeply digestive activity; and when it has digested everything, when it has vomited up everything, regurgitated, expectorated, reintegrated, it falls asleep" (77). The violence of abjection leads to rest: "Syncope always provokes this sensation of reunion. It is the moment of calm, which seems endless although one guesses that it is tenuous. You return to yourself; it is a 'disheartening,' but you find yourself again" (256-57).

Along with Kristeva, Clément sees abjection as part of love's inevitable cycle. Abject suffering necessarily prefigures true relationship. Abjection enables union but also limits union's duration. As Kristeva puts it, "Such a suffering produced by the lack of the other is the indispensable lining of beatific satisfaction, assumed and accepted. Suffering would thus condition jouissance, while jouissance would be the spur of a new suffering quest" (*Tales* 161). Bringing this system to the field of literature, Kristeva writes, "The contemporary amatory narrative thus tries to convey at the same time the idealization and the state of shock germane to amatory feeling: the sublime is this neither-subject-nor-object entity that I have called 'abjection'" (*Tales* 367-68). The positive side of abjection is this sublime achieved through union between lovers. In Buber's terms, this sublime occurs between selves who transcend their own "I" for the sake of becoming "Thou" to one another.

Kristeva and Clément both mention the close relationship between abjection and

humor. For Kristeva, human experience of the sublime "must nevertheless and indeed be paradoxical, for when the sublime is revealed through its obscene, aggressive, destructive, deadly, or simply painful and abject medium--it becomes degraded, breath-stopping, laughable" (367). Likewise, Clément aligns "syncope" with laughter: "A divine jolt, an acceptable spasm, accepted without distrust, laughter has concerned many philosophers; they sense, beyond its innocuous exterior, the seriousness of the thing. Those who have come near to laughter have declared that it springs up from the ruptures, the 'differences in level'" (8). Like abjection, "Laughter intrigues by its course: a short and beneficent ecstasy, it moves toward anguish" (8). Already appreciating this function of abjection is the work of feminists linking laughter to the female body, to jouissance and the release of the repressed. As Hélène Cixous writes in "The Laugh of the Medusa,"

> [P]oetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive," a woman "must write her self, because this is the invention of a *new insurgent* writing which . . . will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history. (311)

Further studies of abjection applied to laughter could examine the connection between comedy and the abject in literature. This relationship seems particularly important to the humor of twentieth-century parody and metafiction, specifically in the way those techniques both simultaneously identify with and distance themselves from something, rupturing the text or the experience of reading in the process.

There is also much to be done in applying the theory of abjection to racial

inequality and economic hardship as portrayed in proletarian literature and works about minorities. As Nancy Chodorow argues, theorists must acknowledge "that social conditions can be life-draining and debilitating, and psychoanalysis should certainly explore more fully just how much difficult social conditions shape and constrain subjectivity and psychic life" (9). Sociologists, philosophers, and literary critics could also use the concept of the abject further to elucidate the mutually constitutive relationship between one's self-concept and one's interaction with society, as well as that between a parent or society and a person's self-consciousness.

The most important applications for the theory of abjection, I believe, are in metaphysics and studies looking toward a transcendent Other with which humans identify. In "From One Identity to Another," Kristeva takes up Husserl's defintion of the "transcendental ego": "Neither a historical individual nor a logically conceived consciousness, the subject is henceforth the operating thetic consciousness positing correlatively the transcendental Being and ego. . . . [A]ny linguistic act, insofar as it sets up a signified that can be communicated in a sentence . . . is sustained by the transcendental ego" (1166). Although this ego is understood as the subject only insofar as it comes to know itself in language, dependent upon the symbolic understanding of "I" in consciousness, the space in subjectivity ready to be filled by this pronoun is also given a name. For Kristeva this is the *chora*, a name and conception taken from Plato's *Timaeus*. The chora is defined as a

> receptacle . . . unnamable, improbable, hybrid, anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and consequently, maternally connoted to such an extent that it merits "not even the rank of syllable.". . . [A] term which

> quite clearly designates that we are dealing with a disposition that is definitely heterogeneous to meaning but always in sight of it or in either a negative or surplus relationship to it. (1167)

Beyond and before language, the chora is the pre-place of the self that exists as different but only in relationship to Meaning (which I capitalize here because I believe Kristeva is referring to the capacity for all language, all meaning). Though Kristeva would probably not align the chora with the identity-laden labels of innate selfhood or the soul, the step between the two concepts is not large. In her opening remarks to this essay, in fact, she acknowledges the necessary connection between any meaning and a form of transcendence: "Meaning, identified either within the unity or the multiplicity of subject, structure, or theory, necessarily guarantees a certain transcendence, if not a theology; this is precisely why all human knowledge, whether it be that of an individual subject or of a meaning structure, retains religion as its blind boundaries, or at least, as an internal limit" (1163). Thus for Kristeva, twentieth-century literature, in its treatment of the abject, serves a similar purpose to that of religion: "[C]ontemporary literature . . . constituted either by a-subjectivity or by non-objectivity, propounds . . . a sublimation of abjection. Thus it becomes a substitute for the role formerly played by the sacred, at the limits of social and subjective identity" (26).

The self *gains* subjectivity through initial moments of identification in infancy, and this subjectivity is shaped and potentially strengthened or damaged through interactions with others during life. Subjectivity, in turn, is partially constructed and even determined to an extent by its environment and the various discourses and systems that interpellate it, just as modernist and postmodernist theory argues. These two claims,

however, do not of necessity make the self equivalent to subjectivity, especially if it is granted that some level of being pre-exists that state. *Self* does not equal consciousness. As Emmanuel Levinas writes, "To be sure, reflection *upon* the self is possible, but this reflection does not *constitute* the living *recurrence* of subjectivity, a recurrence without duality, but a unity without rest, whose un-rest is due neither to dispersion of exterior givens nor to the flux of time biting into the future while conserving a past" (*Basic* 84). He further explains, "Unlike consciousness, which loses itself so as to find itself again in the retentions and protentions of its time, the oneself does not slacken the knot attaching it to the self only to tie it once more. . . . The oneself is 'in itself' as one is in one's skin" (85). Our beings *are* our selfhood.

For Levinas, this transcendent presence within being is felt nowhere more powerfully than in the human face. In *Alterity and Transcendence*, he explains that awareness of human mortality, the abject unsettling humans experience as beings with skin, is realized in looking into another's face: "[T]hat face facing me, in its expression--in its mortality--summons me, demands me, requires me. . . . The death of the other man puts me on the spot, calls me into question, as if I, by my possible indifference, became the accomplice of that death" (24). Our abjection is both what calls us to be aware of our *self* as well as to be aware of our obligation to other people. Identity is known in relation to an Other, and with that identity comes responsibility. As Levinas writes, "[T]he difference between the *I* and the other remains. But it is maintained as the denial, in proximity which is also difference, of its own negation, as non-in-difference toward one another" (93-94). Recognizing its difference from all others allows a self to stand in *relation to* all others, to experience caring--the "concernful attending to" of

phenomenology--that would bridge the gap between selves. Again, as Levinas puts it, one's knowledge of one's own being ought to carry with it

> [t]he vigilance of a responsibility that--from me to the other, irreducible--concerns me *qua* chosen and irreplaceable, and thus unique and unique only thus, in that identity of I, above all form, outside every order, whom the work of the transcendental constitution already presupposes. Is not the face of one's fellow man the original locus in which transcendence calls an authority with a silent voice in which God comes to the mind? Original locus of the Infinite. (*Alterity* 5)

While revealed in relation to the Other, the self originates with God.

According to Christianity, our selves, apart from intersubjectivity, are known in relation to the Other, the Logos, who is God. Abjection is the prerequisite to this relationship just as it is in the process of infant individuation. In the Old Testament, this abjection is instituted through the Levitical regulations demanding the shedding of blood through animal sacrifice, a tearing of flesh which, symbolically, ruptures the boundary between human filth and Divine holiness. In *Visions of Excess*, Georges Bataille describes how some cultures which still practice rituals of sacrifice similarly understand it as a freeing of the self: "The one who sacrifices is free--free to indulge in a similar disgorging, free, continuously identifying with the victim . . . [,] free to throw himself suddenly *outside of himself*' (70). He goes on to explain, "[T]hus the *me* can increase . . . its painful awareness of its own escape out of the world--but it is only at the boundary of death that laceration, which constitutes the very nature of the immensely free *me*, transcending 'that which exists,' is revealed with violence" (132). Freedom of self comes

only through the violent separation of an Other. As Kristeva writes, the abject "always posits a non-object as polluting as it is reviving--defilement and genesis" (*Powers* 76).

In the New Testament, the eternal abjection allowing the self to identify with the Divine is completed in Christ's crucifixion, a rupture in which the tearing of flesh and outpouring of blood fulfills the precedent of Levitical law. The process of God's abjection is begun, however, at the moment of incarnation. In describing this transcendent split, Paul writes in Philippians chapter two that God, in Christ, "emptied himself" (2:7 ASV) in order to take on the boundaries of human flesh. The description is one of abjection, of a casting aside and throwing off of identity and attributes in order to identify with the *Other* of physical being. Different biblical translations similarly apply the notion of becoming abject to Christ's *kenosis*: "made himself of no reputation" (2:7 KJV), "made himself nothing" (2:7 NIV). Only through such radical identification could human beings enter relationship with transcendence. Only through identification with such transcendence, to Buber's "Thou," can an individual truly say "I." Only through that "I," that *self*'s identification with Christ's death, however, can the self complete this mirroring and participate in a relationship with the Divine. As Bataille recognizes, "The *me* accedes to its specificity and to its integral transcendence only in the form of the '*me* that dies'" (132).

Abjection is therefore the prerequisite to love and to all relationship. Love is founded in the death of Being, in the ecstatic breaking of self and reaching outward towards the Other. Human love, in families and societies, is similarly recognized in the movement of identification that leads to mutual self-surrender. Near the end of *After Theory*, Terry Eagleton writes, "There is an ancient tragic faith that strength flows from

the very depths of abjection" (221). He is correct, of course, yet in using the word "tragic," he implies that this faith in the processes of abjection is false, misguided, or naïve. As this project has demonstrated, numerous psychoanalysts, philosophers, sociologists, and authors recognize the paradoxical power of the abject. Not claiming to be a Christian herself, Kristeva still recognizes Christian theology as the paradigm of human abjection: "The Bible offers the best description of this transformation of sacrifice into language, this displacement of murder into a system of meanings. In this way, this *system*, which counterbalances *murder*, becomes the place where all our crises can be exploded and assimilated" (*Maladies* 120). Levinas' work is an example of this, following the relational ties between self and Other to transcendence. Future studies of abjection could explore this link between religion and psychoanalysis, transcendence and self, and further apply his theories to the study of literature. As Levinas has recognized, "There is abandonment, obsession, responsibility, and a Self because the trace of the Infinite . . . is inscribed in proximity" (*Basic* 91).

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VITA

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